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THE PREY OF THE GODS.

A Novel.

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT,

(MRS. ROSS CHURCH)

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," "VERONIQUE," "HER LORD
AND MASTER," ETC., ETC.

"Where, when the Gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture?—where
Plant thorns, set pain like a jewel?
Ah! not in the flesh, not there!
The rocks of the earth, and the rods
Are weak as foam on the sands;
In the heart is the prey of the Gods,
Who crucify hearts—not hands."
A. C. SWINBURNE.

"If the sense is hard
To alien ears, I did not speak to these.
No, not to thee, but to thyself in me."—TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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CONTENTS OF VOL I.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. COMING EVENTS	1
II. LADY GWYNNE'S PRESENTIMENT	22
III. PUTTING OFF THE EVIL MOMENT	39
IV. THE CLOUD BREAKS	57
V. UNDER THE WALNUT TREE	81
VI. A MATTER FOR THOUGHT	101
VII. LEFT TO HERSELF	122
VIII. ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP	140
IX. DANGEROUS CONFIDENCES	169
X. A FATAL DISCOVERY	188
XI. AT DAISY'S SIDE	213
XII. SIGNING THE WARRANT	241
XIII. A NEW COMPACT	257
XIV. ON THE VERGE	281

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THE PREY OF THE GODS.

CHAPTER I.

COMING EVENTS.

1/2 **I**T is generally acknowledged that of all the tasks society imposes on us, the effort to amuse a party of dinner guests when their powers of mastication are no longer put in requisition, is the one least likely to meet with success.

And if this is the case in town, where the latest criticism, literary, artistic, or political, the best authenticated scandal, and the freshest *bon-mot* from the clubs,

pass readily from mouth to mouth, how much more so must it be in the country, when, the contents of the daily papers being exhausted, and the prospect of the hunting, or shooting season discussed, nothing remains but the state of the eternal crops, to afford mental sustenance to those who have left their lower organs nothing more to do.

Certainly the bored and languid expression on the faces of the dozen or more men and women, guests of Sir Lyster and Lady Gwynne, who are scattered about the drawing-room of Felton Hall, on the sultry August evening on which this story opens, does not seem as though it contradicted the assertion.

Sir Lyster himself, with the characteristic British obstinacy that will not conceive a grate without a fire, is standing on the hearthrug with his hands beneath his

coat tails, carefully airing his nether garments before a heap of white and gold shavings, whilst he lays down the law on the subject now under discussion, with that assumption of complete and unanswerable knowledge, which is the usual index to a mind inconceivably ignorant and brutishly dull; and his appearance bears out the character suggested by his demeanour. Of middle age and height, with grizzled curly hair, and a pair of whiskers of the regular old-fashioned "mutton chop" style, the secret conveyed by his sensual mouth and heavy chin, is passed over by such as are not keen observers of the outward signs of inward nature, in favour of the wide-open, round, blue eyes, which have usually a twinkle in them, and are always bright and clear.

Self-seeking, and the amiability which follows success in the pursuit of pleasure,

are stamped on every feature of his florid countenance ; but yet there are many people (chiefly women) to be found, who, on the strength of his eyes, are ready to affirm that Sir Lyster Gwynne is the most good-tempered of men ; and that no one who looked at him could doubt it for a moment.

But then the same individuals are quite as ready to take their oaths of the indisputable happiness of Lady Gwynne.

There is a pause in the baronet's noisy declamation : a pause during which he looks triumphantly at his neighbours, and imagines that the politeness that keeps them silent, is the effect of his own unanswerable argument ; and for the first time since he commenced to talk, the voice of another is permitted to be audible.

“ Any truth in presentiments ? *Je m'en*

doute. Do you believe in them yourself, Lady Gwynne?"

She is sitting on a sofa at some distance from her husband, the centre of a group of young people of both sexes; and as the question is addressed to her, she raises her face towards the speaker.

A fair face, certainly: fair and pale and delicate, with no especial beauty except such as is conveyed by earnest eyes, and a tremulous sensitive mouth; but with *that* stamped on it, which, were the features the most perfect in the world, would draw away the attention of the beholder to be riveted upon itself,—and that is her expression. For when not engrossed by any topic of immediate interest, there is a vague, yearning look upon the face of Lady Gwynne, which tells of a desire, that consciously, or unconsciously to herself, has never yet been satisfied. And the unsuc-

cessful search has drawn premature lines about her eyes and forehead, and caused the corners of her mouth to droop too much for that of a happy and contented woman of five-and-twenty.

“Believe in presentiments, Major Calvert? No, I don’t think I do ; at all events I never had one that came true. I remember I had a horrid presentiment once that Daisy would meet with an accident on a certain day, and took all sorts of precautions in consequence, but it never came to anything. If I was ever disposed to be superstitious, I think that cured me.”

She is talking almost gaily now, the undefinable expression of disappointment having faded out of her face, and left it for the moment as it ought ever to be—
—young and radiant.

“But putting superstition, which can-

not be too highly deprecated, on one side," remarks Mr. Laurence, the rector of Felton, for whom Lady Gwynne has a very high respect, "do you not think it at the least probable, that occasionally such convictions are granted in order to warn us against danger that may be averted?"

"Do we ever take advantage of such warnings, Mr. Laurence?"

"In your own case, with regard to your child, you say you did."

"Ah, that was all nonsense! I was ashamed of myself for it afterwards."

"What has always struck me as so suspicious about presentiments," resumes Major Calvert, who is one of the guests then resident at Felton Hall, "is, that we never hear anything about them till their prognostications have been proved correct. What I should like would be to receive the confidence of my friend as soon as the

conviction strikes his mind, and then watch with him the issue of events."

"Well, next time I have a presentiment with regard to Daisy, Major Calvert, I promise I will let you know."

"And take no precautions, Lady Gwynne?"

"Ah! that is too much to ask me."

"Yes, indeed," says Mr. Laurence, almost in her ear. "If we would rest calmly on the thought of the future, we must do our best in the present. Heaven helps those who help themselves."

But here Sir Lyster's loud voice again fills the apartment, and directs the attention of everyone present to itself.

"You may take my word for it," he is exclaiming, "that the Conservative Government will never find itself in power again."

"But should this bill pass——" com-

mences Stanley Penryhn, who is brother to the county member, and a man with unusual opportunities for gaining private information with respect to political matters.

“The bill be hanged!” interrupted his host, with that sweet indifference to etiquette that is the characteristic of men of his metal. “I wouldn’t believe it from the Premier’s own mouth. The Conservatives have had their day, and they’d better make the most of it. That’s my advice to them!—What’s that?—a letter?”

And seizing an epistle from the salver which a servant has just presented to him, Sir Lyster tears off the envelope, and commences to devour its contents, whilst his friends, delighted with the opportunity to escape from his blatant boredom, walk off to the other side of the drawing-room, and wish they could devise a decent motive for retiring from the scene altogether.

It is a large, official-looking envelope, with a splashy red seal, that Sir Lyster has received. Lady Gwynne noticed the seal as it was carried into the apartment, and feels an unusual curiosity to learn from whom it comes.

Her friends continue to address her upon various subjects, and she to answer them ; but her attention is only partially arrested, and her flushed and careworn face keeps turning to the hearth-rug, where her husband is interweaving the perusal of his letter with a dislocated commentary which is equally uninteresting and unintelligible to most of his hearers.

“ Dear me !—Very remarkable !—Very gratifying !—How people do come together in this world. — His son, too !— Very strange !—Who would have dreamt of it ?”

At last she speaks to him.

“What is it, Lyster? No bad news, I hope!”

“Oh, dear no! Quite the contrary—only a coincidence! But really it’s the most curious thing possible. Here’s this fellow,”—slapping the envelope to denote which fellow—“whom I’ve not even heard of since we were chums together at Cambridge, writes to tell me that his son, having fallen into ill-health from over-work, has been ordered perfect rest and quiet, and is staying at Burwood—that little place the other side of Leighton, you know.—His son! Ill from overwork! Pshaw! how absurd it seems. Why, when we parted, he had only just gone into tail coats himself. It is incredible!”

“But whose son? Of whom are you speaking?”

“William Slade’s—old Bill Slade, that was in the first form with me at Eton,

and is now, by his own showing, Master of the Blankshire Foxhounds, and magistrate of the county. From what he says here, I presume that his son—what does he call him?—Auberon, is literary, though what Bill Slade can have been about to bring up his eldest son to anything of that sort, I am unable to imagine.”

Sir Lyster says “anything of that sort,” in a voice of the supremest contempt. His physical temperament is robust and hearty in the extreme; he no more believes in sentiment than he does in physic; ignores a heartache with a headache; and has a wholesome horror of anything like poetry, painting, or the fine arts.

But as he speaks, Lady Gwynne’s eyes deepen, and her colour comes and goes.

“What name did you say, Lyster? Auberon Slade—surely not the poet?”

At this suggestion there arises a chorus of interrogation.

“What! the author of ‘Memories,’ and the ‘Satire of Life?’”

“Oh, it cannot be. Why his volumes were the rage of last season.”

“Hasn’t he written a novel too? That one that the *Times* made such a fuss about?”

“It must be a connection. Yet the name is an uncommon one.”

They are all buzzing about Sir Lyster as though they were a swarm of bees, and the name of Auberon Slade the sacrilegious hand that has upset them. Only Lady Gwynne remains silent, with her anxious eyes raised towards her husband’s face, and Mr. Lawrence, as he glances in her direction, thinks she looks as though a spell had suddenly fallen on her.

Sir Lyster is not flattered by the general

doubt thrown upon the personality of his new-found friend. If a poet be really a more desirable guest to entertain than beings who cannot string two jangling rhymes together, why should not Felton Hall have the honour of covering his head as well as any other roof?

Sir Lyster has a magnified idea of Felton Hall, and everything belonging to it, and feels nettled by the remarks of his acquaintances, and determined to prove them in the wrong.

“Why shouldn’t he be the poet?” he interrupts them testily. “Hang it! he might be a better thing a thousand times over, and so I shall tell him without any reserve. But he is William Slade’s son, and his father recommends him to my notice, and that’s quite enough for me. I shall ride over to Burwood the first thing to-morrow morning, and bring him back

with me. Poet or no poet, young Slade shall have little reason to complain of the hospitality of Felton Hall, and so we will prove to him. His father knew better than to suppose I would permit the son of my old college chum to put up at a dirty country inn, and I shall write and tell him so. It is most gratifying to think that Bill Slade should have remembered to write to me, and after so many years too—very gratifying; it pleases me highly. I should hardly have thought he would have remembered me.”

So he runs on, in an unctuous well-satisfied manner, whilst his wife is listening to the congratulations of her female friends.

“Only fancy! having Auberon Slade under the same roof with you. How charming, Lady Gwynne! You will be reading poetry together all day long. How I envy you!”

She listens, but she does not smile ; if anything, looks troubled at the prospect.

“ You forget that Mr. Slade is ill, and down here only for the purpose of recovering his health.”

“ Oh, but not too ill, surely, to repeat his own charming verses, and tell you what first put such ideas in his head. The clever creature ! What a number of questions you will have to ask him ! What a treat there is in store for you ! Oh, Mrs. Blake, are you really going ?”

And here, the general commotion excited by the propinquity of last season’s favourite having provoked a general rising, the opportunity for breaking up the long dull evening is gladly taken advantage of, and in a few moments more the farewells are over, the carriages have rolled away, the bachelor guests of Felton Hall have adjourned with Sir Lyster to his sanctum,

and Lady Gwynne is left standing in the deserted drawing-room alone.

The hour is late and she is weary ; but there is a vague bewildered feeling of unrest floating in her mind, which makes the thought of the close sleeping-chamber overhead distasteful to her ; and, throwing a shawl about her shoulders, she steps hastily out through the French windows of the drawing-room upon the lawn, and lifts her heated face to meet the evening breeze.

It is a peaceful world she gazes on—too peaceful to find an echo in her heart—quiet, almost unnaturally so, and still, with the great harvest moon shining above it : the restful night lit up as the unrestful day, and yet as unlike day as the hot happiness of this earth is to the tranquil bliss that heavy-laden souls look forward to in heaven. The white and crimson roses that

clung so confidingly to the deep porch with early dawn, now, shame-faced at the day's debauch, shrink backward from its embrace, and hang their full-blown beauties from weak and enervated stalks, whilst their strong scent mingles with the still sodden air, and turns it sickly.

The patient cattle, standing ancle-deep in the rich pasture meadows that surround the Hall, are still as death, sleeping as they stand ; not a sound, but the sound of her own breathing, strikes upon her ear, as Lady Gwynne leans with both her arms upon the iron fence that skirts the lawn, and looks up at the starry heavens, whilst the tears gather in her eyes, and fall quickly upon her cheek. She feels lonely, and unhappy, and desolate, though she could hardly tell you why.

Oh, uncongeniality in marriage ! Is there a greater curse to fall on man or woman ?

Here is a case of no hard blows or rough ill-treatment, not even of hard words or petty tyranny, and yet the great unfilled void, the aching sense of solitude which must make itself felt by every mind that yearns for sympathy, is eating into the core of, at least one of, the hearts thus unnaturally linked together. Yet Gwendoline Gwynne looks up trustfully at the harvest moon, and brushes away her tears, and tries hard to battle with the feeling of depression which is creeping over her.

“How foolish I am!” she says impatiently; “what on earth have I to cry about? I ought to be ashamed of myself! My life is so peaceful and undisturbed, that it spoils me for annoyance, until even weariness brings tears.”

And then, to divert her thoughts, she commences to murmur favourite lines of

poetry, half-aloud and half to herself, as if she were reciting a part.

“Wait, and Love himself will bring
The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit
Of wisdom. Wait : my faith is large in Time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.

“Wait, and Love himself will bring——,”

she commences again, running over and over the sweet, solemn words, as though she were bringing down all the powers of her soul to bear upon, and comprehend their meaning, whilst her earnest eyes dilate beneath the force of her imagination.

“I feel unusually depressed to-night,” she thinks again, after a little pause. “What is it that lies upon my heart like lead? Daisy and Lyster are well, and I am in perfect health, and nothing has gone wrong. Why should I be so sorrowful? My life is as unclouded and tranquil as that moon. Am I different from other

people that my spirit will not keep pace with my existence?"

She glances upward as she speaks, with the tears still glistening on her cheeks, but as she gazes, a dark cloud moves slowly across the moon's disc, and for a moment hides it from her view.

Lady Gwynne looks fixedly, almost fearfully at it for the same space of time, and then, drawing her shawl more closely about her shoulders, she turns swiftly to the house, and will not glance that way again.

CHAPTER II.

LADY GWYNNE'S PRESENTIMENT.

SHE re-enters by the same means by which she left, and the first object that catches her eye on stepping over the threshold of the empty drawing-room, is the letter with the splashy red seal, which Sir Lyster had thrust upon the mantle-piece when he quitted the apartment.

Lady Gwynne seems fascinated by that seal: it draws her to it, as the magnet draws the loadstone, and she takes the envelope in her hands, almost against her own will, and turns it over and over, and ex-

amines the superscription and the impress, thoughtfully.

A blood-red hand casting a thunderbolt, with the motto "I shall succeed," cut rather ostentatiously beneath it; a brave motto for an aspirant after literary fame: so thinks Lady Gwynne, as, with a sigh, she lays the letter in its place again.

"How strange," she muses, "that, after all the pleasure I have taken in his poetry,—why, I nearly wore out that volume of 'Memories' last autumn!—I seem to have no desire to meet this man; on the contrary, I would avoid it. Can it be because he is ill, and likely to give us trouble? How selfish and inhospitable I must have grown. Or is it the fear of not being able to entertain worthily a mind so much above me?"

But at this thought she smiles, though sadly.

“Hardly that, when we have had such men as Professor Hümmel and Doctor Barclay staying here, and no ridiculous ideas ever entered my head with regard to them. Oh, it must be a mere fancy, founded on my absurd love of poetry, which makes me feel afraid of meeting Auberon Slade; or, perhaps it is nothing at all but the effects of a thunderstorm brewing in the air. What impressionable fools we women are!”

But fanciful or not, she does not appear capable of easily dismissing the notion from her mind, for when Sir Lyster Gwynne, much impregnated with the fumes of tobacco, and brandy and soda, comes noisily up the stairs, an hour or so afterwards, banging every door with which he has to do, and uttering “Good-nights,” to his companions upon the very threshold of his wife’s apartment, he finds her still sitting in the arm-chair by the half-closed

window, and apparently lost in a deep reverie.

“Holloa !” he exclaims, roughly ; “why are you sitting here ? Don’t you intend to go to bed to-night ?”

“Oh, yes ! by-and-bye ; but the evening air is so cool and pleasant. Lyster, is there any *necessity* that we should ask Mr. Slade to stay at Felton Hall ?”

The question comes so unexpectedly, so perfectly irrelevantly to the subject in hand, that the baronet, who is not particularly quick at grasping an inference, stares at her for a moment in complete bewilderment.

“What *are* you talking about ? Any necessity for behaving with hospitality towards Bill Slade’s son ? Why, of course there is ! all the necessity in the world : in fact, one couldn’t possibly do anything else. I shall ride over to Burwood the

first thing to-morrow, and bring him back with me, and tell him this is his home as long as he chooses to make it so. I am quite anxious to see the young fellow. I wonder if he is like his father!"

"But don't you think it will be rather imprudent to ask him here for an indefinite period before we know how long he may be getting well again? Nor even what he is ill of?"

"Ha! ha! ha! I suppose you have fearful visions of small-pox and scarlet fever; and of seeing Daisy's smooth face scarred and pitted for life. No—no! my dear; depend upon it *I* will take care of that. I have not been master of myself and of my household for so many years without having learned how to look after both my own interest and yours."

Sir Lyster delivers this truth with considerable satisfaction to himself; it is a

fact which he is so fond of impressing on all whom it may concern, that some of the household have been found sufficiently sacrilegious to doubt its being a fact at all.

But take heed, Sir Lyster, there are diseases in this world more baneful even than the small-pox and the scarlet fever! Lady Gwynne does not look satisfied, she leans her head upon her hand, and lets her eyes rove into vacancy; and her husband is not so dull that he cannot perceive the drift of her imagination.

“Why, I thought you were all for poetry and such-like fiddle-faddle!” he exclaims, almost angrily, “and would jump out of your skin to have the maker of such trash to entertain. What’s up now? What more objections have you to make upon the subject?”

But she does not heed his rough sar-

casm, or if she heeds, she does not notice it.

She only rises quickly from her chair, and places one hand on her husband's arm, and fixes on his face her earnest eyes.

“Oh! Lyster, be advised by me, and do not ask that man to Felton Hall until you know something more about him.”

“But why? What reason have you for saying so?”

At that she looks bewildered, and half foolish.

“I cannot tell you—I do not know. It may be only a fancy on my part. But, remember, you have never seen him, and the house is so full at present; and I have an idea, somehow, that—that—we shall not get on together.”

“What absurd folly! when you have not even met the man!”

“I know that—but he is ill, and will

require rest and quiet; and our house is always noisy and boisterous."

"Hang it all!" is the impatient reply; "I suppose we can give the fellow quiet if he wishes it. Let him have the green room, with the morning room next to it, and sit there as many hours as he likes. But I hope I shall find him of different metal from that. He may write as much rotten poetry as he chooses, but if he has a drop of his father's blood in his veins, he will know a partridge from a pheasant when he sees it, and handle a gun better than he does a pen. So now, let's get to bed, and hear no more of this nonsense. Auberon Slade is *my* guest, not yours; and all you have to do is to see he has enough to eat, and is not laid between damp sheets."

"Oh, I will promise so far," she answers, with a faint smile, as she retires from the

wordy contest, and offers no further remonstrance to her husband's wishes.

But the next morning—a glorious morning, lighted with one unbroken stream of sunshine, and canopied with perfect blue—when Sir Lyster, bluff and hearty, but considering no one's wishes but his own, has ridden away from the very breakfast-table to make acquaintanceship with the recluse of Burwood, Major Calvert finds Lady Gwynne standing in one of the recesses of the old-fashioned dining-room windows, looking thoughtfully—almost solemnly—at the brilliant display that nature has spread out before her.

“Sir Lyster will have a hot ride,” he remarks casually, as he joins her; “but he is determined to be back by luncheon-time.”

“Will he be back by luncheon?” with a look of enquiry.

“So he says ; and with the phenomenon in tow. Are you very curious to see him, Lady Gwynne ? Miss Musgrave has been unable to eat any breakfast this morning in consequence of her anticipation.”

“Oh ! now, Major Calvert, that is too bad of you !” exclaims Emily Musgrave, a county belle, still in her teens ; “when you know that all I said was, that I wondered if he wore long hair and turned-down collars. It is a great shame to repeat it, and I’ll never tell you anything again.”

“Did I repeat it ?” demands the Major in a voice of injury. “I only said that anxiety had robbed you of your appetite.”

“Which you know is not the truth,” pouts the offended beauty. “As if I cared what Mr. Slade is like. And I daresay, after all, that he will turn out a most commonplace individual, who will smoke

and drink brandy-and-water, and care for nobody but himself, like all the rest of you."

"He might even be worse," retorts her opponent, "he might prove to be a married man! For you know," he adds, after having enjoyed the quick look of consternation excited by his supposition, "we have never heard anything to the contrary! What do you say, Lady Gwynne? Is this Slade to turn out a *rara avis*, or a very ordinary barndoor fowl?"

"I do not know. I cannot possibly say," she answers, hurriedly. "I have not had time to think about it yet. Oh! how intensely hot the day is going to be."

"Too hot for riding, or walking, or anything," acquiesces Miss Musgrave, as she takes up a station by the side of her hostess.

"Will it be too hot to drive to Chorley

Farm with me and Daisy, do you think, Emily? Old Nurse Richards is sick, and I have promised for some time to go over, and sit an hour with her. You will find the shady old garden there cool enough, and the fruit the finest in the county."

"Oh, charming!" exclaims the younger lady, "there is nothing in this world I like so much as visiting poor people, and seeing all their funny little ways. But we shall be back by luncheon time, I suppose, Lady Gwynne?"

A smile curls up the corners of Lady Gwynne's expressive mouth; the first smile that has circled there that morning.

"Oh, certainly! that is if we start at once. I have already ordered the pony carriage, and Daisy is being dressed at the present moment. You will not have to wait for us, Emily."

"Then I will go and get ready," replies

Emily, as she rushes from the breakfast room, which has long since been deserted excepting by these three.

Major Calvert is left alone with Lady Gwynne ; he notes her heavy eyes, and look of general depression, and he is a friend of sufficiently long standing to be entitled to remark on them.

“ You are not well, Lady Gwynne, or you are troubled. I cannot remember when I have seen you look so little bright before.”

She smiles and sighs at the same time.

“ Am I given then to constant giggling ?”

“ Like some one who shall be nameless ! Scarcely ! and you knew it before you put the question. But you cannot deceive me by trying to avoid enquiry. If you are well, there must be some cause for the deep thought in which you have been wrapped this morning.”

“I have no wish to deceive you, Major Calvert—on the contrary, it will be a relief to speak to you about it. There is a cause for my depression, but one for which I am totally unable to account—a horrible foreboding of evil—I cannot tell why or wherefore—has been hanging over me like a black cloud ever since last evening!”

“Of evil! to yourself or others?”

“Oh, don't ask me! I know nothing about it!” she exclaims, half wildly. “I only feel that it is there; and that I cannot shake it off. I am sure that something is going to happen; my heart is like lead within my bosom.” And with that the tears well up into the sweet grey eyes and stand quivering on the long dark lashes, ready to fall with her next breath.

Major Calvert is interested; he is not one of those men who are hoodwinked by the affable demeanour of his host; he has

long guessed that all is not constant sunshine within Felton Hall ; and this little appeal to his sympathy on the part of Lady Gwynne flatters his vanity. Yet what can he say, excepting that he trusts her surmise may not prove true.

“Perhaps it is the weather that affects your spirits,” he suggests soothingly. “Such heat as this is enough to try anyone.”

But of this suggestion she takes no notice.

“You remember what we were saying last evening about presentiments,” she goes on presently, “and I promised I would tell you next time I had one. Major Calvert,” with a serious emphasis, that for the moment greatly impresses her hearer, “I have a strong presentiment this morning that some great misfortune is in store for me.—Now, don’t say afterwards, when it has come to pass, that I never told you of it !”

“But—good heavens! Lady Gwynne, in what way do you anticipate this evil—by death—or how?”

At this she stands silent for a moment, as though considering.

“Yes!—I think by death; or by something very like it. Don’t think me a coward, Major Calvert, but I feel afraid to-day—afraid of shadows—and that is not my nature, as you know.”

“But, under the circumstances, you must not, you really should not, drive to Chorley alone. Let me go with you, Lady Gwynne, or take a servant.”

At the proposal her lip curls.

“Oh, you mistake me, Major Calvert. It is not of *things* I am afraid—I would ride the new filly to Chorley Farm, or put my own horse at the highest leap I have ever attempted yet, if you were to dare me.”

“What, then, do you fear?”

The vague look comes back again.

“That is what I cannot tell you. Myself or nothing, it is all the same; there is a dead weight here,”—laying her hand upon her breast,—“which I cannot get rid of: the black shadow of the evil which is coming upon me. Do not let us talk of it any more, Major Calvert. Talking can do no good; let me get out into the fresh air, and forget it, if I can.”

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING OFF THE EVIL MOMENT.

THE little inn at Burwood, with its low ceilings, whitewashed walls, and general air of rustic simplicity, is much more in accordance with the feelings of Auberon Slade, at the present moment, than his father's country house in Blankshire, or even his own chambers in town, which are fitted up with every luxury that modern art can devise, or taste require. He has been ordered a complete change, and a completer change could scarcely have been found for him.

The deepest tranquillity, the most perfect

repose, reign along the shady paths and rippling streams of Burwood, and our hero revels in them day after day, and tries altogether to banish the unwelcome thought that he must, at some future time, return to work and to the world again. For the world has not used him very kindly of late.

A brilliant literary *debût*, followed by the usual amount of flattery and adulation, which, in fashionable language, means being much sought after, as a thing to be stared at, and commented upon, at réunions and conversaziones, had, during the past season, lifted Auberon Slade into a position, higher than that to which, by birth and merit, he was entitled, and slightly turned his head with respect to his own pretensions.

And this mistake had been followed by a crushing of his pride, a levelling of his ambition, which, to a man of his sensitive

nature, was very hard to bear. But, determined to bear it, or to kill it, he had returned to work with an energy worthy of its cause, but too fierce for a nature so finely organized that it suffered trebly in proportion to that of other men. So that mental labour was soon followed by physical debility, and Auberon Slade was ordered by his medical attendants to leave literature to itself for the present, and take up trout-fishing, or any other pursuit that laid no tax upon the brain, instead. Which accounts for his being found beside the quiet streams of Burwood.

On first arrival, he had been disposed to grumble at everything around him ; but by the time we meet him, when he has been located there for a whole fortnight, he is enchanted with the little village, and the unbroken rest by which it is pervaded.

He loves to wander, hour after hour,

beside the stream, filling his creel with speckled trout almost mechanically, as his thoughts wander forth into the rich fields of fancy, and resolve themselves into flowing metre and soft dulcet rhyme.

And then to return to the unpretentious inn to dinner, where, if it cannot tempt, there is nothing to offend, his taste, and, during the long warm August evenings, to stretch himself upon the grass with his cigar, and dream, not unkindly, of what "might have been," and feel the soothing influence of the hour calm his spirits, until he rises up again, almost contented, and quite willing that events should be determined for us, and we, not left to follow the bent of our own inclinations.

He is recovering so rapidly from his disappointment, under the combined effects of time and absence, that he grudges a thought to anything that bears upon the

past, and dreads the slightest interruption to the monotony of his existence.

He hates the postman, who finds his way even to Burwood, and brings him letters that disturb his rest,—importunate letters from his publishers, and trifling letters from his female friends, and, occasionally, one of those official looking envelopes, with the splashy red seal, that had so impressed Lady Gwynne, and the contents of which usually opens his old sore, by some rough allusion to the past, or suggestion with respect to the future.

How heartily he desires that they could forget him, even as he wishes to forget them.

And so fearful is he of having his solitude broken in upon, that the arrival of a stray traveller, for bait and refreshment, at the Burwood inn, is sufficient to send Auberon Slade out with his rod until

the shades of evening have fallen, and all chance of encountering the obnoxious intruder gone.

Judge, then, of his disgust, when, on the morning in question, having lingered over his breakfast until a later hour than usual, the keeper of the little hostelry throws open the door of his sitting-room, and, with considerable pride, announces "Sir Lyster Gwynne."

Auberon Slade, starting to his feet, is about to exclaim that there must be some mistake, but the manner of the new comer at once undeceives him.

"My dear Slade! I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I had no idea you were here, until I received a letter from your father last evening. Hadn't heard from him for years! A most remarkable coincidence! I've come to carry you back with me to Felton Hall. You must take

my man's horse, and he will return in the cart, which will be over for your luggage in the course of an hour."

Nothing can be a greater contrast than these two men present to each other ;—the one, bluff, hearty, and robust in the extreme ; with round open eyes that know no variation of light and shade, and a confident manner that carries everything before it. The other, pale, quiet, and dignified ; with an appearance of great reserve—but the power of feeling too plainly stamped on every feature to augur well for his happiness in this world.

Sir Lyster has thrust his hand into that of Auberon Slade, who is forced to take it whether he will or no ; but the vague glance that he directs towards his new acquaintance shows how incapable he is of comprehending the honour done him.

" Ah ! you don't know me, I see !—I

suppose your father has not yet written to you on the subject. Didn't think I should be so ready to pick you up—eh ! But I never forget an old friend. I am Sir Lyster Gwynne, of Felton Hall, in this county ; and your father was one of my old Cambridge chums long before you were thought of."

" Oh ! I comprehend !" said Auberon Slade, as he rescues his hand from the Baronet's grasp. " I am sure it is very good of you, Sir Lyster, to take the trouble to come over and see me. I was not aware my father had the honour of your acquaintance. Won't you take a chair ?"

" No time to sit down, my dear boy—I have a whole covey of guests waiting for me at home ; and I promised to be back by luncheon. How soon will you be ready to start ?"

" To start ?" Auberon Slade has not

realised the opening part of Sir Lyster's address to him.

"Yes! to come back to Felton Hall with me! You don't suppose I am going to let old Bill Slade's son put up in a dirty little hole like this, whilst there is a spare bed in Felton Hall to receive him. No such thing, my dear fellow; you sleep under my roof to-night, or nowhere at all."

"You are very good. I hardly know what to say to your proposal."

He means that he hardly knows what to say against it. He is horrified at this sacrilegious intrusion upon his peace—detests the very idea of going to stay at Felton Hall—has taken a violent dislike even to the cordiality of the familiar invitation—and the presumptuous assurance of his ready acceptance of it—and yet he does not know what excuse to bring forward for the refusal that is trembling on his tongue.

Sir Lyster evidently imagines that it is gratitude that keeps him silent.

“Come, come, my dear fellow! no thanks! When you come to know me better, you will find that it is my greatest satisfaction to do little kindnesses of this sort; and I have never forgotten anybody who has been associated with my school days. It is quite sufficient for me that you are your father’s son, to render seeing you under my roof a pleasure—quite a pleasure!”

And Sir Lyster pats Auberon Slade upon the shoulder in a patronising manner as though he were a schoolboy.

The young man flushes and is silent. If he has a predominating fault, it is self-esteem: and he is wounded instead of gratified by the behaviour of the Baronet.

Where can this bumpkin have vegetated who has never heard that some of the highest

names in the kingdom have considered it more than a pleasure to receive Auberon Slade under their roofs : and solicited his appearance there as a favour done to themselves. When he next speaks, it is with a coldness that would have made itself apparent to anyone less dense than Sir Lyster Gwynne.

“ Thanks ! I am much obliged to you, I am sure, for your good intentions on my behalf ; but I regret that I am totally unable to avail myself of them.”

“ But why ?”

“ I have been ordered here for my health, and am compelled to remain in the strictest seclusion.”

“ You shall be as quiet in our house as you like. I have desired Lady Gwynne to appoint you a couple of rooms ; where you can remain all day if it so pleases you.”

“ But I am forbidden to keep late hours.”

“ At Felton Hall, my dear Slade, everyone gets up and goes to bed, at the hour he likes best ; so that excuse is no excuse at all.”

“ But—of course, I am most flattered by the pressing nature of your invitation, Sir Lyster—but I have work to finish during the next few weeks, which it is absolutely necessary I should do ; but which would be quite impracticable, I fear, amidst such a party as you doubtless have assembled at Felton Hall.”

“ My dear fellow ! you will be your own master in every respect, and can use your time as you think fit. Your father has made me perfectly aware that rest and quiet are necessary for your restoration to health ; and Lady Gwynne is quite prepared to receive in you, a guest who is to be allowed to do exactly as he likes.”

Auberon Slade hesitates ; the offer is

certainly tempting, added to which he does not know what further objection to bring forward in opposition to it.

“ Lady Gwynne is exceedingly good ; indeed, I hardly know how to thank her or yourself, Sir Lyster, for your cordiality to a perfect stranger. Still—I——”

“ My dear Slade ! the thing is settled ; your rooms are waiting for you in Felton Hall, and there can be no possible reason for your remaining here. How long will it take you to put up your traps ?”

“ Oh ! not five minutes, if that is all ”—and Auberon Slade moves thoughtfully towards the door—he feels that he shall go to Felton Hall against his will, and yet some internal influence urges him to hold to his first resolution, which causes him to halt upon the threshold, and make one last attempt at resistance.

“ Sir Lyster, there really is an obstacle

that is not to be overcome. I had forgotten it until this moment. I have no evening clothes with me."

At this, the Baronet bursts into a loud roar of laughter.

"Telegraph for them, Slade ; meanwhile, I will lend you a suit of mine."

It is the stranger's turn to smile now, as he glances from his own slight limbs to Sir Lyster's portly figure.

"Well ! if that won't do, we will excuse the morning clothes. Lady Gwynne would excuse anything in a poet. Hang it all, man, come over and try us for a week ; and if you don't like your quarters by that time, we'll give you leave to return to Burwood. But come with me to-day, you must ; for I've pledged my word to it."

There is nothing further to be said then ; and in a few minutes more, my hero is wrestling with the straps and buckles of

his portmanteau. But in anything but a good humour with himself.

“It strikes me forcibly that I’ve done a very foolish thing,” he thinks, as, having accomplished his purpose, he passes the brushes through his hair. “What are these Gwynnes to me, that I should give up my enjoyment to swell the list of their guests? But I don’t see how the deuce I could have got out of it either! It’s just like my father’s bungling interference to tell them I was here. Well, it’s too late to alter now, but I shall seize the first opportunity I can to make an excuse to return to town. They’ve spoilt my holiday with a vengeance!”

In which agreeable mood Sir Lyster bears him back in triumph to the Felton luncheon table.

Five minutes after their horses have been led round to the stables, a pony

chaise comes creeping up the carriage-drive, and turns into the stable-yard, instead of drawing up before the house as usual.

“Why this novelty?” exclaims one of its occupants, curiously.

“It’s about the men’s dinner-hour,” is Lady Gwynne’s evasive answer; and then, as her eye catches sight of the horses which are just being unsaddled, she asks the helper who has come to hold the pony’s head, quickly, almost eagerly, if Sir Lyster has returned from Burwood.

“Yes, my lady.”

“With—with anybody else?”

“With another gentleman, my lady. The gentleman rode James’s horse. James is to return with the spring cart. The spring cart has started for the gentleman’s luggage, my lady!”

“Oh, come! *that’s* all right,” exclaims

Miss Musgrave delightedly, as she reaches the ground, and helps Daisy after her.

But Lady Gwynne does not seem delighted.

“I have such a dreadful headache,” she says dejectedly, as they walk towards the house together. “I don’t feel at all fit to appear at the luncheon-table to-day.”

“Oh ! but I am sure the sight of Mr. Slade will cure you, Lady Gwynne ! Only fancy his being really here ! I can hardly believe it. I hope there will be time to run upstairs and make one’s self decent before luncheon.”

But as they reach the upper corridor, her companion halts and almost staggers.

“Emily, I am really in great pain. I don’t think that I can go down. You must tell Sir Lyster, and make my excuses to Mr. Slade. The heat of the day has been

too much for me. If I can sleep for an hour or so, I shall be all right again."

But as she turns into her bedroom, her heart is beating faster than her head, and the feeling that is knocking there is very much like fear.

She feels safer, she could not say wherefore, within the precincts of her own chamber ; and relieved, she does not know why, that she has put off the meeting with her new guest for a few hours longer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLOUD BREAKS.

L EFT to herself, and overpowered by the 'sultry weather and the pain in her head, Lady Gwynne falls into a restless slumber, from which she is but too soon aroused by the heavy knuckles of Sir Lyster upon the bedroom door.

“ Well, what's the matter with you ? ” he exclaims, as he takes a seat by her bedside. “ Why the deuce weren't you down at luncheon ? Sick or sulky—eh ? ”

“ Sick, ” she answers languidly, as she presses one feverish hand against her burn-

ing temples. "I have such a dreadful headache, I can hardly hold my head up at all."

"Then why are you such a fool as to go out in the sun? You know you can't stand it, and you might have a little more consideration when I am expecting you to do the honours of the Hall to a new guest."

"I am sorry, Lyster. I will try to make up for it, by rendering myself doubly agreeable, if I can, at dinner."

Her ready submission touches some fibre in his coarse nature, and he stoops and kisses her. She shrinks from, almost shudders at the rough embrace; but she endures it quietly, and it is all that he demands of her.

His is no sensitive spirit to discern in a moment where it is welcomed or repulsed; and she has no other light but his, by which to interpret her own feelings. Her private

opinion, when she forms one, is, that she was born cold-blooded and dislikes all familiarities. She never dreams that there may be sweeter kisses in the world for her than these—kisses which shall seem to lift her from this earth to heaven !

“ Well ! I bagged my bird, as perhaps they’ve told you,” resumes Sir Lyster, after a pause.

“ Yes ! I heard that he had come.”

“ And will stay into the bargain, if I have any voice in the matter. A fine young fellow as ever stepped. I can’t think what Bill Slade can have been dreaming of to put him into the book trade. However, he says it was his own choice. Queer, very queer ! He ought to have been a farmer or a country gentleman like myself.”

“ Yes,” incredulously.

“ Ah ! I know what you’re expecting to see ! A melancholy-looking chap, with

lanky hair, and bones coming through his skin, wasted with misery—eh?”

“Indeed! I expect no such thing,” she interrupts indignantly.

“But you’re vastly mistaken, I can tell you. A capital fellow, who can talk on any subject, is devoted to sport, and knows good wine, when he sees it.”

“I never doubted his capability in that respect,” she murmurs.

“With a neat, light figure, that I’d take my oath never rides an ounce over eleven stone. A first rate horseman, and looking forward to the shooting season as eagerly as either Calvert or myself.”

“It is lucky he has such tastes, for we shall be able to amuse him here.”

“Oh, yes, I hope so; but he says he has some confounded scribbling to finish that will keep him in during the mornings. However, he has promised to ride over the

estate with me this afternoon, so I must go and join him. You will be down to dinner?"

"Oh, certainly. I hope you made my excuses to Mr. Slade."

"Ha, ha, ha! I told him you were dying to see a real live poet, and I supposed it was excitement at the prospect that had made you take to your bed so early in the day. Ha, ha, ha! we had a good laugh over it, I can tell you, and Slade seemed as much amused as anybody."

But little pointed as the sarcasm is, it has the effect of making Lady Gwynne's cheeks burn like fire.

"You didn't really, Lyster!" starting up in her bed. "Oh, how foolish, how unkind of you! You make me feel quite ashamed to meet the man. And you know that it is not the truth."

“ Oh ! come ! ” blusters Sir Lyster (Sir Lyster always does bluster when he feels himself to be in the wrong), “ it’s no use making a fuss about it ! What does it signify after all ? The man is not likely to care two straws whether you are excited about meeting him or not. And if he does you are clever enough to undeceive him.”

But no comment on his remark issues from his wife’s closed lips.

“ Well ! if you choose to be sulky I can’t help it. I have no more time to waste here ! Good-bye.” And, whistling loudly, Sir Lyster slams the bedroom door after him and stumps down into the hall.

She listens to his retreating footsteps and then turns on her bed, and tries to sleep again : but the power to sleep is gone.

“ It is so annoying,” she thinks, as the subject which has disturbed her, revolves in her mind, “ to be misrepresented to a

perfect stranger, and made to appear in such a foolish light. What can he think of me? Oh! how I wish I had made an effort to go down to luncheon! Anything would have been better than this. The man will suppose I am a perfect idiot."

Lady Gwynne is not aware that if Auberon Slade wishes to keep up his character for originality he must find another epithet for her, having already applied the one in question to her husband.

"How can I tell what influence such a speech may have upon him?" she muses. "He may be some frivolous, self-conceited creature (people are often so different from what they say or sing) who will augur all kinds of nonsense from my supposed anxiety to meet him. And when I would have avoided it than otherwise. It is too provoking!" and with a sigh she throws her flushed face again upon the pillows.

It is a relief to have the reverie that follows, broken in upon, by the entrance of Miss Musgrave, brimful of intelligence about the new arrival.

“My dear Lady Gwynne, may I come in? How is your poor head? Everyone was so concerned about you at luncheon! And I wanted you there so much. I am dying to hear your opinion about Mr. Slade.”

“What is your opinion, Emily?”

“My dear!”—with uplifted hands—“I’m horribly disappointed! It’s a dreadful confession to have to make, but I can’t help it, it’s the truth! He’s not a bit like a poet! He’s the most ordinary looking creature possible.”

Lady Gwynne cannot help smiling.

“I am sorry he has turned out such a failure, Emily!”

“Oh! he would not be so bad if he were anyone but Auberon Slade. But he hasn’t the appearance of a spark of romance about

him. And to see him eat at luncheon—it was enough to disenchant anybody. Talk of his ‘dead hopes’ indeed (do you remember those lines, Lady Gwynne?) I am quite sure his appetite didn’t die with them.”

“Sir Lyster seems to anticipate a great deal of enjoyment from his society.”

“Oh! I dare say he will do well enough for Sir Lyster,” replies the younger lady, unobservant of the slur her words cast on the requirements of her host; “but I shall never believe he is the author of ‘Memories.’ Oh, those lovely verses! How they used to haunt me! Do you remember them, Lady Gwynne?”

Lady Gwynne knows them by heart, with many of their fellows, and is never tired of repeating them to herself; but she does not say so. Her only answer to Miss Musgrave’s question is a simple acquiescence.

“Well! Mr. Slade doesn’t look a bit like that, you know! I don’t believe he ever had a thought, or a memory—dead or alive!—he drinks much too much beer. I saw his tankard filled three times.”

“Oh, Emily, remember what a thirsty day it is, and be merciful! But what is he like, then?”

“Tall and slight, with a yellowish complexion, and no particular expression in his face. If he has any especial virtue, I should say it was inquisitiveness about other people’s affairs: he looks so curiously out of the corners of his eyes. But his chief amusement seemed eating. After which he picked his teeth, according to the fashion of the day, and took no more notice of anybody.”

“He is not too formidable a lion then for me to encounter without appre-

hension," says Lady Gwynne, with an attempt at rousing herself.

"I should think not ; the most commonplace individual possible ! And not a bit handsome ! My only desire now is, to find out who writes his books for him. I am quite sure he can't have done them himself. He looks a great deal too stupid."

"Perhaps he may improve upon acquaintance, Emily."

"There is room for it, Lady Gwynne ; I hope he may."

This little conversation, instead of increasing, seems to lessen the indisposition of Lady Gwynne. Left to herself again, she rises from her bed, almost cheerfully, and rings for her maid to come and brush out her long fair hair. This is an operation of which my heroine is particularly fond. She says, that it refreshes her when weary and soothes her when depressed. And as

she submits to it this afternoon, dreamily hanging meanwhile over a book which she makes an attempt to read, the cloud seems to pass from her spirits, the air is lighter, the heat of the day more bearable ; she even anticipates the moment when she shall go down-stairs again.

“ Fond of sport, and wine, and chatter,” she ponders (her maid watching her reflection in the glass meanwhile, and wondering what should cause so palpable a shade of disappointment to pass over the features of her mistress) ; “ and sufficiently ordinary to have a good appetite, and not to be ashamed to own it. Well ! why should he ? How could the mind work hard when the body is not well nourished ? And as for his shooting and fishing propensities, his possession of them is the most fortunate thing in the world for me ; for if his health permits of it, Lyster

will be able to take him entirely off my hands. By-the-way, no one has mentioned anything about his health, excepting that he looks pale. Well! I need not have been alarmed on the score of meeting him. ‘Commonplace’ and ‘ordinary.’ How strange that a man should be so different in print to what he is in reality. I suppose he cannot really feel what he writes.” But here certain lines, as full of music as they are of feeling, flash on the mind of Lady Gwynne, and defy her to imagine that their author can be a man without a soul.

Her cheeks flush as they vibrate through her memory, touching her heartstrings with a mysterious sympathy that seems but the echo of its own beating. So has she often longed to pour forth her unspoken sorrows, and give *that* a voice, which she has as yet hardly dared to whisper to herself; but she

does not believe that she is capable of doing so ; whilst Auberon Slade, though perfectly unknown to her, seems to have rifled all the treasures of her heart beforehand, and written down, for her especial benefit, what she has not the power to express.

But if he is really all that Sir Lyster and Miss Musgrave have represented him to be, Lady Gwynne is quite certain that, in real life, they shall have no sympathy with one another.

“It is very puzzling,” she concludes, with an inward sigh, as, the dressing of her hair completed, she proceeds to submit to the task of being robed for dinner ; yet she looks brighter for the information she has received, and less careworn than she did in the morning.

Her manner contradicts her statement, and seems far more as though she rejoiced to have heard that the acquaintanceship

of Auberon Slade is no more to be desired than that of less gifted mortals.

Meanwhile the object of her meditation is no better reconciled to the position in which he has so unexpectedly found himself than at first.

True, that both Sir Lyster and Miss Musgrave are correct in their reports, and his chagrin was not sufficient to rob him of his appetite at luncheon, or to render him silent and uncommunicative ; for in yielding to the Baronet's importunities, he feels that he has taken upon himself an obligation which, as a man of the world and a gentleman, he will fulfil to the uttermost. But the situation bores him ; the ride round the estate has bored him ; the egotistical, never-ending small talk of Sir Lyster has driven him wild ; and as he prepares for dinner, striving to make himself look as fresh as he can in his morning clothes (another cause

of worry, for Auberon Slade hates to appear before women in inappropriate costume), he is inventing all sorts of stories that will serve as plausible excuses to return to Burwood, or to town.

The undeserved cordiality with which he has been received ; the pleasures that are promised him ; the luxuries by which he is surrounded ; have no power to make him feel contented. He came down to the country to obtain perfect rest, and freedom from the restraints of society, and he has been baulked of his intentions against his own free will ; and although he does not show it, he is out of temper with himself and the world.

All this time he has not once thought of his hostess, except as an additional prospective source of annoyance to him ; it has not entered his head to speculate on her probable appearance (he never thinks or cares about

the looks of women now ; all his feelings on that subject being buried with the dead hopes he mourns so prettily) but if an idea of her had crossed his mind, it would only have presented itself in a stout and imposing shape, a fit match to the charms of Sir Lyster.

But having finished, as he best may, his toilet, and turned into an end of the long velvet-carpeted corridor which leads to the lower rooms, Auberon Slade is startled to come upon the figure of a woman ; clad in a flowing robe of soft white muslin, relieved by knots of mauve ribbon ; leaning out of one of the windows which look upon the park, and watching the glorious August sun as it sinks like a ball of fire behind the trees.

There is nothing remarkable in this woman's figure, except that it is slight and graceful ; nothing very remarkable in the

high brow and rapt earnest eyes, turned up towards the evening sky ; and yet our hero stands still, and thinks ; not that she is pretty, or aristocratic, or well formed, but simply that he has never met with such a face and figure before.

There may be hundreds and thousands of women, better looking and better made, but this one is original.

The slight noise of his approaching footsteps causes her to turn her head, and she starts and leaves her position, and comes a little forward.

“ Mr. Slade, I presume,” with a blush, and timidly proffered hand ; “ I am very glad indeed to see you—Sir Lyster told me you had arrived. I am so sorry I was unable to be down to luncheon.”

And then Auberon Slade understands that he is in the presence of his hostess. Surprise for the first moment almost de-

prives him of his usual readiness of speech, but in the next he has recovered himself, and apologises freely for the roughness of his attire ; whilst she, after one rapid glance at his face, keeps her eyes fixed upon the ground, and begs him not to mention the subject, from that point of view.

“Certainly not pretty,” is his mental decision, as he slowly follows Lady Gwynne down the broad staircase to the drawing-room, “not a single good feature in her face, and much too thin for my taste. But marvellously speaking eyes and mouth, and no lack of brains. I wonder what on earth made her marry such a brute as Sir Lyster.”

“Emily is right,” she thinks, as she precedes him ; “decidedly commonplace, so far as his appearance is concerned, and very delicate-looking. I wish I could find something to say to him. I suppose I shall

not feel so *bête* when we know each other a little better."

Yet, notwithstanding that she is so plain, and he so ordinary-looking, Lady Gwynne is conscious, more than once, during the dinner that succeeds, that the eyes of the new comer are bent upon her from the opposite side of the table; not in impertinence or idle curiosity, but with a kind of vague interest, as though he were trying to read some riddle in her face; and she cannot summon up the courage to lift her own to meet his gaze.

Oh, hearts! that look out thus upon each other in the first hour, from strange eyes whose colour you have yet to learn—
attracted by no outward circumstance of light or shade, but drawn together by a mysterious sympathy which you can neither account for nor dispel—take heed, be careful; and if an obstacle exists to your per-

fectured union, fly from each other as you would fly a pestilence. For this sudden, undesired attraction ; this electric message from a stranger's soul to yours, is not of earth ; it is part of the inexplicable mystery that surrounds our being ; God given, either for happiness or misery, and far oftener for the latter than the former.

It is not Passion, for passion can generate at the vision of mere beauty ; nor is it Love, in the common acceptation of the word, for love can live for hearts who love in answer, though their souls may never interchange a syllable.

It is something far more dangerous, more subtle, because more unsuspected in its influence, than these ; it is the unspoken language of one everlasting spirit to another.

Passion evaporates with satiety ; Love may turn to hate, or perish with its object ;

but Sympathy, true, soul-felt, and earnest, cannot die !

Conceived spontaneously, born in a moment, and full-grown in an hour, it exists to all eternity ! It may be interrupted upon earth, but it must be renewed in heaven ; because it is the indissoluble marriage-tie between the only particles of us that meet again, unchanged.

There is a large party of guests assembled in Felton Hall at this period, but very few amongst them, comparatively speaking, are ladies, and not more than three or four companions accompany Lady Gwynne from the dining table to the drawing room. Then the comments pass freely upon Mr. Slade, and are mostly found to agree with those of Emily Musgrave.

The new comer is too thin : his eyes are too small : his feet too large : and he talks to no one but the gentlemen at dinner ;—

which, after all, is the real cause of offence.

“Now what do you think about him, Lady Gwynne? Are you not very much disappointed?”

She hardly knows what to answer: she scarcely remembers what the man is like. She is only conscious of a soft, new, delicious feeling of contentment creeping over all her senses, and making her feel as though some one had been speaking to her, and she were listening for the sound to be renewed. But they press her to reply.

“No, I don’t think that I am so disappointed in him; but perhaps my expectations were not so high as yours. I think that we shall like him. Any way, we can but try.”

And later in the evening, when her rippling laughter reaches Major Calvert’s ears across the room, and he asks her slyly

what has become of the gloomy presentiment of the morning, she turns a face upon him which is free from any expression but that of complete satisfaction.

“Vanished! Major Calvert. Vanished altogether. I think I must have slept it away this afternoon. Now, don’t laugh at me in that manner! What a wretch you are! I declare you shall never extract one of my secrets from me again.”

And her light laugh rings out once more through the apartment, until Auberon Slade, turning to look at her, thinks how unlike she appears to the woman whom he encountered that afternoon, leaning out of the corridor window, and gazing so intently at the setting sun.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE WALNUT TREE.

THE next morning may be a very tempting one, but Auberon Slade successfully resists all endeavours on the part of his host to make him forget duty for pleasure, and retreats to his den directly after breakfast, thereby sinking considerably in Sir Lyster's opinion; though after his many promises to the contrary he dare not combat his resolution. He cannot imagine what a young fellow can see in pen, and ink, and paper, to distract his attention from the prospect of a ride over

to Chorley ; nor how consent to shut himself up in a stifling room during the best part of the day.

When Calvert suggests that it may be business that detains Mr. Slade in the house against his will, Sir Lyster becomes a little pacified ; and as the Major follows up his remark by a wish that he could turn *his* brains to any account, by Jove ! the Baronet is almost reconciled to the idea of leaving his literary guest at home.

For Sir Lyster only fusses and fumes and contradicts before women ; he is too politic to show that side of his nature to his own sex ; he can be bombastic enough with them, it is true, when left unchecked, but a manly opinion, decidedly expressed, generally draws an acquiescence from him ; or, at least, commands his silence.

Lady Gwynne does not regard the resolution of their guest in the same light that

her husband does. She admires him for it. Not knowing the objections he entertains to staying at Felton Hall, she fancies she reads in the expression of his face, that his heart for that morning, at all events, is not in his work, and once or twice she thinks he is on the point of yielding; but, no! he holds firm against a strong opposition, and fights off all remonstrances with a simple "must."

And as she sees him walk deliberately up-stairs, and hears him turn the key in the door of the morning room allotted to his use; she feels almost proud, as though he were something that belonged to her, and she held a personal interest in his strength of purpose.

She has not had the opportunity of closely observing the working of a strong, firm will; except in the person of Sir Lyster, whose virtues seldom stop short

of their opposite extremes. And the quiet, unhesitating refusals of Auberon Slade, do more than interest,—they charm her.

But the gentleman in question, although he can be as resolute as he chooses in his own cause, is not perhaps deserving on this particular occasion, of all the praise his hostess mentally awards him.

The morning is a glorious one, and moving through the fresh air would certainly be pleasanter than bending over manuscript in a close room; but he has work to finish that must be completed by a certain time, and he has been an author long enough to know, that a day lost is not easily regained.

At Burwood he was used to ponder quietly upon his coming task, as he strolled along the edges of the trout stream, and then throw all his gleanings upon paper by the sober lamplight; but if he stays at

Felton Hall — and Auberon Slade has already come to the conclusion that unless he wishes mortally to offend his father's old friend, he will be obliged to stay there, for a few days, at least—he hardly sees how he can do otherwise—he knows that neither the time for peaceful reflection, or for evening labour, will be his own.

It is a noisy, boisterous household : generally filled by the loud voice of Sir Lyster, or the shouting of his guests ; the last place in the world that a busy man would choose to stay in.

Auberon Slade enlarges on this fact as he dashes off a hasty, angry letter to his father, begging to know why he did not leave it to him to say whether he desired the society of Sir Lyster Gwynne or not ; and accusing the old man of having by his inadvertence placed him in a most unpleasant position, from which he foresees

great difficulty in extricating himself with politeness.

The letter concludes with a request that his father or mother will send an epistle to Felton Hall in the course of a few days, requesting his return to Blankshire, as he has no intention of remaining there beyond that space of time ; his literary engagements (as Mr. Slade might have premised, before plunging him in so awkward a dilemma) being far too numerous to be fulfilled in a house filled with company.

After having relieved his feelings in which manner, Auberon Slade pulls a lot of foolscap paper out of the bottom of his portmanteau, and placing it before him, sits down to compose some verses which he is pledged to send to a certain popular magazine by the end of the month. For our hero has reached that happy stage on the ladder of Fame, when his name, and the

name of his contributions to the periodicals he elects to favour, are advertised in letters three times the size of those dedicated to less fashionable contributors ; which fact causing many well-meaning, but ignorant people, to suppose that his paper or poem must also be three times the length of any of the others, has been the means of much disappointment, when on the purchase of the magazine, a sonnet, consisting of eight lines, addressed to no one in particular, and touching upon no especial subject, has been found to be the only contribution under the thrilling signature of Auberon Slade.

But if the public, on the production of a few creditable lines, destitute of false quantities and glaring errors, will make a man “the rage,” it must expect to see the value of his wares rise in his own estimation, as he has risen in that of itself.

And Auberon Slade, for this season at

least, is decidedly “the rage,” but whether deservedly so, is another question. He is a very fair poet; and has a knack of breathing passionate ideas, in language as musical as pure, that goes home to human hearts; and has caused even his reviewers to acknowledge that there is real merit in his verses, and a future before him if he chooses to work it out.

But Auberon Slade is only six-and-twenty; sanguine, and not a little conceited, and the danger is, lest he should consider that he has already done enough; that he could not do much better even if he tried; and rest contented with the praises he has won.

The disappointment that has already overtaken him has done him good in this respect—it has lowered his opinion of himself, if not of his verses; but no one that regarded him as he now sits, twisting the

pen about in his hand, and dashing off the first ideas that come into his head, with scarcely a reviewing thought, as if anything were good enough that emanated from him, could doubt that he requires to step further into the fiery furnace of affliction, before his confident nature is subdued, and the real metal that is in him, purified for the world's use.

He is writing a sonnet upon "Woman's Eyes;" rather an abusive sonnet indeed, remembering the flashing orbs that so lately led him on, but to deceive him. But somehow he does not proceed very fast with his work; thoughts do not come quite so readily as usual; the heat is oppressive, and he feels strange in the unaccustomed room; added to which, whenever he commences to level his indignation at the perfidious orbs of the sex in question, the earnest eyes of Lady Gwynne, as he first

saw them, seem to rise between the paper and himself, and forbid the wholesale condemnation.

“Very strange eyes,” he muses, “so wonderfully changeable; one moment full of mirth, and the next with a yearning expression in them that is positively painful to contemplate. I wonder if she ever deceived a man as that jade deceived me! No, I couldn’t believe it of her. There’s too much truth in her face. Besides, it’s always the women who stick up for beauties that turn out such——”

But what the women who stick up for beauties turn out in Mr. Slade’s estimation he had best keep to himself.

It certainly is not a day for steady application; the soft warm air, laden with the scent of flowers comes stealing in such a seductive manner through the open casement, and wandering over his hair and

moustaches like a woman's lip ; the crimson leaves of autumn creepers, fluttering against the sill, sound like the rustling of a dress : and twin pears, dependant from one stalk, keep tapping on the upper panes as though they invited him to step outside and contemplate their beauties from another point of view.

Low murmurs, too, rise from the lawn beneath his window, mingled with the occasional shrill chatter of a child ; until Auberon Slade, quite convinced that for the present, inspiration has flown, deserts the foolscap and the inkstand—oh, recreant wooer !—and advancing to the window, leans both his elbows on the sill, and gazes on the scene before him. How much more jolly and cool it looks, than he feels up there ! How he wishes he were an idle man, that he might go down and join them !

Under the shade of an old far-spreading walnut tree sits Lady Gwynne, a broad-brimmed hat upon her head and a small green volume in her hand; whilst at her feet, Daisy, her only child, a troublesome elf of eight or nine years old, is vainly endeavouring to induce her kitten to submit quietly to be taught to read, by having its paw firmly grasped and drawn along the lines in her spelling-book; and seated on chairs beside her, are Emily Musgrave and two other girls, cousins of Lady Gwynne, whose fingers are employed in needlework, whilst their eyes are every now and then raised to the face of their hostess.

It is evident that she is reading to them, but what he cannot yet determine. But he feels that it is abominably hot weather, and he is so unaccustomed to compose by daylight, he does not believe

he shall do a single stroke of work that morning.

Then he walks up to the table, tumbles over all his papers, decides that woman's eyes, and everything else that belongs to woman, are worn-out subjects, and he must think of something fresher ! Only he never can evolve a new idea except when the house is silent, and he is quite alone. Finally he returns to the window and takes up his old position. It is certainly much cooler to sit in a current of air.

Either the pears have ceased tapping on the window-pane, or Daisy's voice is more subdued ; but he can hear perfectly well what Lady Gwynne is reading now. The first words that fall upon his ear act like a wicked charm—"I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere."

"Tennyson, by Jove !" and up starts Auberon Slade, as excited as a war-horse

that hears the trumpet call to battle, and prepares to rush down-stairs. A reproachful thought does flash across his mind, as he thrusts the virgin-foolscap to one side, but he dismisses it peremptorily.

“Bother the work!” is his silent exclamation; “I can do twice as much by night as I can by day, and I shall feel more like myself to-morrow. No fellow on earth could write, with Tennyson being read aloud just outside his window. And she didn’t read that line half so badly either. I wonder if she’s got any taste for that sort of thing,” and in another moment he is in a position to answer the question for himself. Or would be—that is to say, if Lady Gwynne would have the goodness to proceed with her occupation, instead of getting as red as a peony, and thrusting the “*Idylls*” behind her garden chair.

“Oh, Mr. Slade! I trust we have not

disturbed you. I thought we were too far off for our voices to reach your window."

"And so you would have been, had I not purposely courted the pleasure of listening to them. But the idea of lying under this luxuriant shade, and hearing Tennyson read aloud, was too great a temptation to me. Pray, go on, Lady Gwynne!"

And, casting himself upon the grass beside Miss Daisy, Auberon Slade awaits the conclusion of Arthur's glowing speech.

But Lady Gwynne is scarcely equal to the occasion. She crimsones, if possible, deeper than she did before, and falters out that she cannot—really she cannot!

"Not before you," she concludes, with a nervous laugh.

Auberon Slade's expressive eyes look upward and backward at her blushing face.

“And why not before me, Lady Gwynne? Because I can scribble poetry is no reason why I should be able to read it. And indeed, I doubt whether I could read it more appropriately than I heard you do, just now.”

“How much did you hear?”

“One line—but that was quite sufficient; the reader who can give the proper intonation to that line, will be able to interpret the whole poem!”

“Oh! Mr. Slade, do you read it to us then,” exclaims Miss Musgrave, who would not be rendered too bashful to express her wishes, even by the presence of Tennyson himself.

“I would much rather hear Lady Gwynne read it,” he answers gravely.

Thus encouraged, Lady Gwynne, with rather a rueful countenance, picks up the fallen volume, and re-opens it at the page

where she left off. She feels horribly nervous at reading poetry before Auberon Slade ; but she is sensible enough to know that by a reiterated refusal she will only lower herself in his eyes ; and that it is best to take him at his word, and believe he really wishes to hear her.

So, with rather a trembling voice, and amidst a battery of sly looks from her cousins and Emily Musgrave, she takes up the thread of the royal speech, and reads it to the end ; forgetting herself after a while, in the beauty of the words she utters, and throwing so much pathos into them, that she is startled by the round of unpremeditated applause that greets her conclusion.

“ Bravo, Gwendoline ! I never heard you read that poem so well before,” bursts from her cousins—and Miss Musgrave declares that the presence of Mr. Slade must have inspired her.

But he says nothing in the way of admiration, except a fervent "Thank you," as he takes the volume from her hands.

"Now you will really read to us—won't you?" she demands hurriedly, as, red with excitement, she bends towards him.

"Yes! do!" interrupts Emily Musgrave, "and then Lady Gwynne must repeat some of your poetry, Mr. Slade! She knows it all by heart, and is always saying it to herself."

"*Emily!*" says Lady Gwynne—in a voice which sounds quite changed in its warning and reproach.

"Now, it's no good denying it, Lady Gwynne; besides, Mr. Slade can only feel flattered by the compliment. I remember distinctly your telling me, last spring, that you always felt such pleasure in repeating it to yourself when you lay awake at night, because it tallied so exactly with your own feelings."

At this Auberon Slade, with all a poet's vanity, cannot help glancing upwards at the countenance of his hostess; but the distress he sees pictured there, causes him to turn away as hastily, and occupy his attention with the green books scattered on the grass.

"May I read my favourite to you?" he says, with apparent indifference, as he turns over the pages of another volume by the same author.

No one answers him; and he dashes, without ceremony, into "Love and Duty." His voice is mellow and flexible to a degree, and his manner eminently dramatic without being stagey; so that all his listeners are deeply impressed, and a profound silence follows the last word of the poem.

"Could that be surpassed?" he asks, when the silence has continued long enough.

"Hardly!"

The reply comes from Emily Musgrave—but the tone is so subdued, he scarcely recognises it.

“That is *your* favourite also, is it not?” she continues, as she turns to Lady Gwynne.

At this, the reader looks up eagerly.

“Is it indeed? But I am not surprised that our tastes should agree.”

Lady Gwynne smiles; but she does not answer him; her eyes are too full of tears, and he sees it. A dangerous ovation on the part of woman to genius!

CHAPTER VI.

A MATTER FOR THOUGHT.

BUT if Auberon Slade's vanity is excited by Lady Gwynne's tears in the morning, it receives a wholesome check from Lady Gwynne's frankness in the evening.

And this desirable result is brought about chiefly by the pertinacity of Sir Lyster in desiring her to sing a certain song.

She has been very gay to-night ; for her, particularly gay, for she is experiencing, for the first time, the delight of being understood ; of feeling that at last she has fallen

in with some one who will not stare when she says what she thinks; nor call her honest impulses extravagance; and her reverent admiration, rhapsody.

For so much she has gathered from the conversation which followed her morning interview with Auberon Slade. And the new pleasure brightens her eyes and plays in smiles about the corners of her mouth; she is *espiégale*, witty—at moments, almost sharp; she is bringing out a third phase of her character for the dissection of her guest, who, unknown to himself, is becoming hourly more interested in the contemplation of her various moods.

But Sir Lyster wants a song; and of course Sir Lyster will have it.

“What are you all chattering there for?” he exclaims, as he looks up from the game of piquet he is playing with Mr. Lawrence, to where his wife and her companions are

clustered together. "Can't you *do* something?"

"What shall we do?" inquires Lady Gwynne, as she turns her beaming face upon her husband.

"Sing or play. Why don't you sing us a song, Gwendoline?"

She rises at once, and moves towards the piano; but Mr. Slade is there before her, to throw back the heavy cover of the instrument, and turn over the leaves at the wrong time, in the deliciously helpless manner of those who have not sufficient knowledge of music to ascertain when a performer has reached the last bar on the page.

Lady Gwynne is not a brilliant musician, but she plays and sings sufficiently well to please those who listen to her. To-night, however, she seems a little nervous, and the first chords struck are rather feebly pronounced. Yet not too much so, but

that Sir Lyster discovers they are not the prelude to the air he wishes for.

“Not that,” he says, authoritatively ; “sing the song you sung us two nights ago—something about a ‘secret.’ What was it ?”

Lady Gwynne reddens considerably.

“Oh ! that was nothing—only some nonsense of my own. Let me sing the ‘Fireside Song’—or Sullivan’s ‘Give.’”

“Not a bit of it ! Let’s hear all about the secret. I like the air ; it’s been ringing in my ears ever since.”

Lady Gwynne twists about upon the music-stool, and wishes the air had been a quarter less attractive. The fact being that the music is her own, and the words are Auberon Slade’s ; and she feels shy of letting him see they hold so much attraction for her, even though it is months since she set them to her simple melody.

“ Oh ! do sing it, Lady Gwynne ; it has such lovely words,” chimes in Miss Musgrave.

“ And if the music is your own, it will possess all the deeper interest for us,” pleads the voice of the author by her side.

“ Oh, very well—of course,” she utters in a fluttering manner, and thereupon begins to play and sing.

The verses are some of his least meritorious ; dashed off in a hasty moment, and but little thought of afterwards ; but they are very simple and very pathetic,—and it would have been better if she had at once acknowledged they were his.

Of course he recognises them ; watches, too, the glowing colour that mounts higher and higher in the singer’s face, as she sees the recognition in his own ; and draws a pleasing inference from the fact, for which

she hates herself, and thinks that she despises him.

“You have heard the words before?” she says, confusedly, when she has finished.

Sir Lyster and Mr. Lawrence are busy over their game of piquet, and the other gentlemen are grouped about the young ladies at the further end of the room, so that they are, comparatively speaking, by themselves.

“I believe so,” he replies; but the look which accompanies his answer displeases her. It is too conscious.

“Why can’t you say ‘yes’ at once? Sir Lyster does not know them, because he never reads poetry; but everyone else does, of course; and when I feel in the mood for murdering harmony, I generally compose the air first, and then search through all my books of verse, from Shelley downwards, until I find some stanzas that will fit it.”

“Indeed! How very low you had to grovel before you accommodated yourself this time.”

She laughs uneasily, but will not contradict his words.

“Oh! this melody is in very common measure, and easily suited. I know it is a horrible unorthodox plan; but I am no mistress of composition.”

“Nor I a judge of musical orthodoxy; and so hoped the sentiment had first arrested your attention, and then the words set themselves unconsciously to music in the night.”

Which so exactly describes the process by which Auberon Slade's stanzas have wedded themselves to the melody of Lady Gwynne, that she looks conscious, and has nothing to advance in denial of it. Only she wishes that he would turn his eyes another way.

“Emily, come and play us something. You are all terribly lazy to-night.”

“Oh, not yet, Lady Gwynne, please! . Mr. Denison is teaching us such a capital method of telling fortunes by the cards.”

She rises and goes towards them, Auberon Slade following in her wake.

“Do you believe in such rubbish, Mr. Denison?”

“Scarcely, by this plan, which is only a game; but I have known wonderful things foretold by a friend of my mother’s, the Comtesse d’Assi, who is some connection of, and learned her method from the Italian lady whom Napoleon used to consult before engaging in any great political measure.”

“How does she tell them?”

“By the cards, as I do,—only in a different manner.”

“And you credit them?”

“They have often come true.”

“Well, the only fortune I believe in,” says Auberon Slade, “is the fortune we make, or mar for ourselves. What men call destiny is usually the work of our own hands.”

“Not always, my dear Slade,” replies Major Calvert, laughing. “Sometimes it depends upon Government, in which case it is too often marred, and as my faith is pinned entirely upon that respectable body, I need not tell you it is but small.”

“Please don’t make such a dreadful chattering, Major Calvert. I cannot hear what Mr. Denison is saying.”

“You are very cold-hearted, Miss Musgrave,” declares her oracle, as he turns the cards over and over in his hand, and tries to look profound. “You keep all your admirers at a distance by your cruel behaviour. There are two,—no, three. at

this present moment, who are on the verge of committing suicide from the effects of your reticence and impenetrability."

As soon as the laugh which this very improbable prophecy calls forth from all sides, has subsided, Lady Gwynne exclaims :

"But I don't call that telling one's fortune. You are an impostor, Mr. Denison, you only say what already exists. You might guess as much as that, from the sheer contemplation of your companion's face, without the aid of cards at all."

"Pardon me, Lady Gwynne, everyone has not, like yourself, the faculty of reading characters at first sight."

"Lady Gwynne is celebrated for making lucky guesses in that respect," some one says to Auberon Slade.

"Indeed ! can you tell my character, Lady Gwynne ? You have had no opportunity of learning it."

She turns towards the eager face up-raised to hers, and scans it for a moment. Then she says, thoughtfully,—

“What ‘luck’ can there be in reading the character of a man or woman, rightly? To me it seems so difficult to misunderstand it. There are no two faces alike,—nor two pair of hands.”

“Do you draw much inference from a hand?” demands the poet, remembering, with secret satisfaction, his own shapely paw.

“Oh, I think so! they are so different. I always look to a woman’s hand for her breeding, and her mouth for her temper. In your sex, manual exercise too often destroys the shape.” And Lady Gwynne lays her hand upon the table as she speaks, and contemplates it a little lovingly. I have no desire to disguise her faults.

It is an aristocratic hand; not very

small, perhaps, nor faultlessly moulded ; but white as marble, with long taper fingers, perfect nails, and a firm steadfast look about it,—like a hand that one would like to grasp when the damps of death are on one's brow, and the weakness of mortality commences to make itself felt.

Auberon Slade perceives it, and with a cry,—almost of pleasure,—starts forward and places his hand upon a line with hers.

A remarkable occurrence ; the two hands, although belonging to different sexes, are almost precisely similar ; and his companion sees it, as well as herself.

“How very much alike they are,” he says, exultantly. “Are our characters the same ?”

But Lady Gwynne withdraws her hand too quickly to express satisfaction at his movement.

“You forget, Mr. Slade,” she answers

coldly, "that you are a man, and I a woman; and that strength in me would become weakness in yourself."

"Tell me my character," he urges.

"Are you sure you would like to hear it?"

"Quite sure!—from your lips;—though if you say that I am very weak, I'm afraid that I shall not believe it."

"I will not say anything I do not think," she answers quietly, and turns her eyes upon the radiant countenance beside her; whilst everyone, except the players at piquet, suspends his occupation to listen to her judgment.

"Strong powers of feeling," she goes on presently, "acute sensitiveness, love of refinement and luxury, and a very equable temper. Am I right so far?"

"I think so—pray proceed."

"An affectionate disposition, but rather

inclined to self-indulgence ; a very tender heart——”

“ By Jove ! she is determined to turn his head,” is the silent opinion of Major Calvert, who is standing close by. But his decision is made a moment too soon ; though the eyes of Auberon Slade are beaming with self-satisfaction.

“ But,” continues Lady Gwynne, and in her “ but ” there is a tone which almost bears on sadness ; “ but with this, an impatience of suffering, Mr. Slade ; a want of perseverance ; an inclination to begin things and leave them half completed ; that, unchecked, bids fair to render all your virtues void.”

There is a disposition to laugh on the part of the bystanders at this untoward conclusion, but something in the faces of Lady Gwynne and Auberon Slade, makes them refrain.

“I have no doubt you are quite correct in that particular,” exclaims the latter, although he looks anxious and uncomfortable at the decision of his hostess; “but I am afraid you give me too much credit for powers of feeling. I have none, Lady Gwynne; I am a philosopher; or a cynic, if you will; certainly a man blessed with too good an appetite and perfect a digestion, to take the trouble of worrying myself about anything that may happen in this world.”

She glances at him quickly—

“You do not feel joy strongly, nor disappointment?”

She hits him hardly there, but he does not wince under it.

“I have seldom found anything in this life capable of affording me the first, and as to the second, I am a stranger to it.”

“The world has used you too well, Slade,” says Calvert, “it has spoiled you

with flattery and incense ; you will talk differently at some future day."

"Shall I, my dear fellow ? Then I sincerely trust that day may never shine for me," he returns, with an assumption of complete indifference. He is horribly annoyed at the opinion his hostess has expressed of him, and hopes to pique her by a denial of her former statement. The assumption deludes Lady Gwynne, who takes it for earnest ; and after gazing at his nonchalant appearance for a moment incredulously, turns away to another part of the room, quite determined never again to evince the slightest interest in Auberon Slade.

"He is not at all the man I took him for," she thinks, with just a shade of vexation. "He is as conceited as any empty-headed puppy about town, and I wish I had never affected sufficient interest

in him to read his character. He will probably think to repay my condescension by an increase of familiarity. But he is much mistaken if he imagines I would permit him to do so."

So that her manner towards her new guest for the rest of the evening, is very cool and indifferent ; and he perceives the change, and is made, not exactly unhappy by it, but ill at ease, and more determined than ever to leave Felton Hall upon the first occasion.

But could Lady Gwynne have seen him when, in the solitude of his own room, he leans both his elbows on the table, and thrusts his fingers through his hair, and stares mechanically at the bed-curtains ; she would have relented having dismissed him with so cold a bow.

He is really unhappy now ; not at what she said, nor that she should have said it,

but because in his heart he feels it to be true.

“Impatient of suffering—unpersevering—and self-indulgent,” he mutters to himself. “Can it really be the case ; and has this woman, a perfect stranger to me, and my past life, read my character more plainly than I ever read it for myself?”

As he ponders, the remembrance of great designs sketched out and left in embryo, of noble projects unachieved, and visions of amendment still to be put in execution, flit across his brain and leave it troubled.

“It is true that I have done but little as yet,” he thinks, “but I am young, and life still holds so much enjoyment for me. When I have somewhat palled of its pleasures, I shall have more time to consider how best to benefit my generation.”

Too much enjoyment ! and too much love

for it! That is just what her ready wit discovered. Is it possible that at his age one can enjoy life too much?

He muses on the luxury of his habits, and those of the society he keeps; the little time he gives to thought and study; the large leisure he devotes to fashion; the aptitude with which he casts aside business for the least temptation drawing him the other way—the disappointment into which this tendency betrayed him.

Aye! that *was* a disappointment! at the moment, sharp and piercing as a two-edged sword, dividing joints and marrow; the mere memory of which can make him shudder, even at humiliation that is past.

Impatient under suffering! As Auberon Slade recalls the wild unhallowed period that succeeded that great pain, he is ready to acknowledge that, somehow, Lady

Gwynne knows him better than he knows himself.

“ A very remarkable woman ! ” he soliloquises, as he lights a last cigar, by the opened casement, “ one moment, as soft and dependent as a little child ; and the next, keen and penetrating as a detective officer ; rather determined too, in her way ; and with any amount of feeling. How she could love too, if that curved open mouth of hers tells truth. I wonder, by the way, if she has ever had any scope for exercising the talent. Hardly, I should imagine—at any rate, with such a blockhead as Sir Lyster. Well, I wish she had not discovered this confounded weakness of mine, or rather fancied she had discovered it. For I am not weak, or wanting in perseverance—by George ! I’m not—see how I worked all through last winter—and I’ll prove it to her, by finishing my poem before

I leave the Hall. My lady shall not find me wasting my precious time again, by reading to her beneath the walnut trees."

And casting aside the end of his cigar with every appearance of impatience, Auberon Slade retires to his rest.

CHAPTER VII.

LEFT TO HERSELF.

THE morning reflection does not disperse the evening resolution, which (as subsequent events will determine) is rather a remarkable occurrence in the life of our hero; and he sticks to it manfully also, during two days, for which lengthened period he absents himself religiously during working hours, not once showing his face in the garden or even downstairs, to the intense disgust of the younger members of the female community; who, as Miss Musgrave remarks, “can’t bear a creature who

has had his head so turned by flattery that no one is good enough for him."

At the end of that time, however, as Lady Gwynne is passing through the hall after breakfast, she hears his voice from the upper story.

"I say! look here! can you get me some more ink?"

"Mr. Slade! is that you?"

"Lady Gwynne!" in a voice of horror—"is it possible I was addressing you? I am so shocked; I thought it was one of the servants, and I have broken my bell."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Oh, no! pray don't mention it! It is only that I have used up all my ink; I will come downstairs and fetch some for myself."

But as he reaches the middle of the broad flight, she is already ascending with

the ink bottle in her hand, and they enter his sitting-room together.

It is a pretty little nook which has been allotted to his use, all trimmed with green and white ; a lady's boudoir in fact, besprinkled with fragile ornaments, and pictures, suggestive of innocence and peace, in the midst of which the world-worn man looks as incongruous as a snake reposing upon daisies.

She fills his china inkstand carefully, and then halts by the table for a moment, thoughtfully regarding the mass of papers scattered on its surface, whilst he looks down upon the rich border of her dress, and sighs, though very softly, to himself ; the womanly presence making him understand the void that has existed in his chamber theretofore.

“I hope that you are comfortable here, and have everything you want,” she says,

with all the anxiety of a hospitable mind.

“Everything, thank you! Nothing could be more convenient or luxurious. In fact, I begin quite to dread returning to my dull chambers in town.”

“There is no necessity for you to do so until you feel inclined. What a mass of writing! Have you done all that, since you have been here?”

“Not quite all, but the greater part, and that within the last two days. Although Lady Gwynne *does* consider me so idle and unpersevering,” he adds, with an upward glance that is half deprecating, and half sly.

Poor Lady Gwynne is one big blush.

“You know that I could only tell you what the contour of your face and head suggested to my mind. But it is not necessary we should prove all that nature in-

tended us to be ; that would indeed be a frightful destiny. The worst inclinations may be overcome ; and in your case, the foibles that I mentioned must at the least have been largely fought against, before your name could have attained the place in literature that it has done."

"Don't lay that flattering unction to my soul," he answers frankly ; "I confess that a disposition to commence things, and then cast them on one side, is my most common failing. Indeed, it is an effort to me to finish anything, even the shortest poem."

She likes his frankness, but she looks grave at his admission.

"Then I should make a point, in your case, of never putting anything aside, even, as you say, the briefest sonnet, until it is completed."

"Ah, if I had your resolution, or your decided spirit always at hand to warn me,

I should do greater things than I shall ever be capable of now."

He delivers himself of this aphorism in such a tone of despondency, that her soft foolish heart is touched.

"My dear Mr. Slade, what a treasonable speech! You have a mother and sisters, have you not?"

"Any quantity of them."

"And would they not warn you if they imagined you required it? They must be very ambitious for your sake, and proud of what you have already accomplished."

"My dear Lady Gwynne, it is the greatest mistake in this world to judge the feelings of others by our own. My mother has a copy of my book of ballads, I believe, lying on the drawing-room table; but I doubt if she, or my sisters, have ever looked into it. I am quite sure they could not repeat a line that it contains, and as to

considering them worth being set to music——”

But at this mention of the predilection for them she has herself evinced, Lady Gwynne colours again, and looks down uneasily, and Auberon Slade stops short in his oration.

She has not been exactly cool in her demeanour towards him since that evening, but she has been less cordial than at first, and more disposed to seek the company of Major Calvert, or any other of her guests. She was a little bit afraid that she had gone too far with Auberon Slade ; that she had appeared too conscious in his presence, and though unwittingly, had paid too high a tribute to his undoubted genius, and, like all modest women, she is sensitive, and in danger now of retreating too far in the opposite direction. And her guest has perceived the change, and it has given him pain.

“Don’t let me think,” he continues softly, “that you regret a circumstance that afforded me the keenest pleasure.”

“It is a little thing to afford you pleasure.”

“A little thing to know that you appreciate my motives—that you can enter into my thoughts and make them your own? Oh! Lady Gwynne, if you say that with sincerity, you cannot know how seldom in this world we meet with sympathy. Many have congratulated, more have flattered me, but it is of very few that I can truly say, ‘we think together.’”

“Your poetry has always given me pleasure,” she admits, though half unwillingly. “I fancy that I can understand it better than that of most people. Despair and lamentation is altogether out of my line; so is the exuberance of joy, for I have never known any violent grief, and my life

has passed as tranquilly as a summer day. But that yearning for companionship, which you so often express—that intense longing for—for——”

“For sympathy,” interrupted her hearer eagerly; “for another soul to speak to yours; to interpret its desires before it utters them; to keep peace when it wishes to be silent, and to barter thought when the inclination for speech arises; in fact, you yearn to find another self.”

“And why not add that I sigh for an impossibility? No two persons in this world are alike.”

“But there are many souls fitted to be companions to each other. Else why should we feel in reading the words of strangers that they convey a correct impression of our own thoughts? Take some of our modern lights for instance,—Tennyson, Longfellow, Owen Meredith—

with how many thousand souls do their souls not throb in sympathy ?”

He is growing sentimental now, but her light laugh recalls him.

“ But how would they all get on in the flesh together, Mr. Slade ?”

“ Well, I hardly know what to say about that ; except, that if they did not agree, it would be, that either the poets had written what they did not feel, or their readers had mistaken imagination for reality. But there is no such key to a man’s heart as his verse, Lady Gwynne, and no such refining process for our own souls as the study of poetry.”

“ Do you read much in that way.”

“ A great deal. I am still but a tyro in the art, you know—a mere student. I hope to do much better than I have yet done.”

He halts, expecting her to deny the pos-

sibility of such an occurrence ; but the only words that drop from her lips are a confirmation of the statement.

“ Of course ! you ought to, at your age.”

He doesn't quite like the answer, but he swallows it meekly.

“ What age do you suppose me to be ?”

“ About my own—six-and-twenty.”

“ I shall be six-and-twenty in December.”

“ There is only a month's difference between us then. And you are at the commencement of life, and I seem to have nearly reached its close.”

“ Lady Gwynne !”

“ Oh, you don't know how old it makes a woman feel to be a mother ! Everything seems over then, except looking forward to one's grandchildren.”

They both laugh at this, and she takes the opportunity to move towards the door.

“ Oh, are you going ? I wish I might come with you ? ”

“ You can do so, if you like. The girls and I are sitting in the morning room to-day. It is too hot to venture out of doors.”

“ But may I bring this ponderous volume with me ? I have been studying dramatic verse of late.”

“ What is it ? Shakespeare ! Oh, you know that we shall be pleased to hear you read, without fishing for a compliment beforehand.”

And so, both feeling unusually light-hearted and gay at having made up their little difference, they descend together to the presence of the other ladies, and spend a charming hour in reading and conversation, before the gong summons them to luncheon.

Having found his time pass so plea-

santly, Auberon Slade ponders on the reason ; and coming to the conclusion that it is far easier to fix one's attention on the matter in hand, when reading aloud than when reading to one's self, steals sneaking downstairs again the following day with Shakespeare under his arm, and a humble request to be readmitted to the morning-room.

Lady Gwynne slightly demurs ; that is, she hesitates, and is not quite certain whether she intends to sit there, or in the garden. But Auberon Slade is equal to all emergencies, and the girls are vehemently opposed to doing anything but remaining where they are, so that their hostess is compelled through politeness to yield her wishes to theirs, and Shakespeare is carried by universal acclamation. Carried, not only for that day, but several succeeding ones, until more than a week has elapsed

since Auberon Slade first read aloud to them beneath the walnut trees. Then a *contretemps* arises, hitherto unforeseen, and threatening to produce consequences, inconvenient, if not serious.

Sir Lyster wishes to rid the house of Emily Musgrave and his wife's cousins, for the first of September is close at hand, and he has invited several new guests to Felton Hall; and Lady Gwynne opposes the measure with spirit. The period originally agreed upon for the young ladies' visit is not expired, and she has an innate dread of being left without female companionship, and begs that she may at least retain one of them.

"Stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated Sir Lyster, in his sweet reassuring manner; "what on earth can you want a lot of stupid useless girls about the place, that can do nothing but sniggle and flirt?"

“They amuse the gentlemen. However shall we get through the evenings without them?”

“Much better than with them. They don’t play cards or billiards, or any sensible game; and only keep the men dangling after them, when they would much rather be in my smoking-room.”

“My dear Lyster! you will be overheard if you speak so loud.”

“Don’t care who hears me. All the better if they do, and take the hint to clear out. They’ve been hanging on here for a couple of months, and we shall want their rooms. I’ve invited Sir John and Lady Cleaver here, and my Uncle Hassell writes me word to-day that he and his wife will be down the beginning of the week.”

“I shall have no companions when they are gone,” says Lady Gwynne in a tone of vexation.

“You will have Lady Cleaver and my Aunt Hassell. What can you want more?”

“My dear Lyster! Lady Cleaver never leaves her room till luncheon-time; and your aunt is so nervous amongst strangers that she takes all her meals alone!”

“All the better. Who wants to talk to old women? You will not be bothered by their company.”

“Yes! of course, but——” She is not thinking of the stranger upstairs, nor of the probability of their being thrown in each other’s way; and yet an instinct, not to be accounted for, yet perfectly definable, (which is oftener observable in women than men, and perhaps bestowed on them in common with the other lower animals, to make up for their lack of reasoning powers), urges her to make another effort to retain one at least of her young guard of honour. “Might not Emily stay? She is always

happy here, you know, and very useful to me. Let Minnie and Emma go home as you wish, and Emily remain for a month or six weeks longer. The house will be empty again by that time."

"No! it is impossible! I tell you that I want their bedrooms."

"I could have a sofa-bedstead put in my dressing-room for Emily. She is a good-natured girl, and does not mind a little inconvenience."

But the nobler animal, fully conscious of its mental and physical powers, is determined to have its own way.

"Hang it all! Am I not master in my own house? I've told you once already that I wish them to go, all three of them, and you stand there twaddling about sofa-bedsteads and such rubbish. I wish the girls *to go*: that's quite sufficient, and so now, let's hear no more about it."

Consequently he does hear no more about it, and by the end of the next week Lady Gwynne's cousins and friend are gone, and she finds herself through the long summer days—save for the two old women who never appear till dinner-time—virtually alone.

Except that Mr. Slade, who must work harder than ever now, if he is to take any recreation in the shooting season, brings down his business, whether of writing or reading, into her sitting-room each morning, and she does not know how to prevent his doing so. He says he can compose so much better if some one is sitting in the same room with him.

CHAPTER VIII.

ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP.

IT is about this time that old Mr. Slade, obedient to the peremptorily-expressed desire of his son—of whom he stands just a little in awe—sends a letter to Felton Hall, to say that Auberon's presence is urgently needed in Blankshire, on business connected with the estate, which will eventually be his own. And Auberon Slade tosses the epistle on one side, and asks his father by return of post, why on earth he neglected to comply with his demands at the proper time.

“I have been expecting your letter for the last week,” he writes, with considerable irritation; “it might have been of some use to me then, it is not the least now. I have been at Felton Hall more than a fortnight, making use of the house as though it were my own, and I cannot run away just as the shooting season is at hand. Besides, Sir Lyster has invited two or three men expressly to meet me, and I am quite sure that he would take my departure at this moment as a want of politeness to himself. You have entirely upset my plans again by your delay, but I must make the best of it, and will take good care to look after myself in future.”

Having dispatched which filial admonition, Auberon Slade resigns himself with Spartan firmness to the horrors of his lot.

He is right in surmising that Sir Lyster Gwynne would take his defalcation at this

particular juncture as a personal affront. Sir Lyster does not like Auberon Slade ; it is hardly possible that two men, differing so widely in their preferences and pursuits, should amalgamate in common life ; but spite of himself, he cannot help admiring him ; and it flatters his vanity to retain so cogent an attraction under the roof of Felton Hall.

For if Auberon Slade and Lyster Gwynne cannot agree in all things, it is not the case with Auberon Slade and other men. He is essentially a man's companion : full of pleasant, worldly chatter, original anecdotes, and smart sayings, that can be carried from one ear to another, and repeated with the greatest advantage. He is an inveterate smoker, and keen sportsman ; can talk over the prospects of the season as ably as he can enlarge upon the doctrinal disputations of the day ; and

discuss the merits of stable or kennel with as much facility as he can quote poetry or prose to suit any topic that may happen to be brought forward.

His is, in fact, a versatile taste and genius, which is half the secret, perhaps, of his success amongst women ; for, whatever men may imagine to the contrary, that much-abused sex seldom likes them any the better for hanging about the drawing-room when their companions are in the hunting-field. A woman likes a man because he is not a woman ; notwithstanding which, when men, having fulfilled the duties of their station, can contrive to mingle a little feminine softness in their social intercourse, they become doubly dangerous animals to be left alone with.

Auberon Slade has this dangerous gift in perfection, and though Lady Gwynne will not permit him to talk on indifferent

subjects during the hours of study, he has contrived to have several strolls with her after dinner, through the syringa and rose-scented labyrinth of the shrubbery ; and to find out that their opinions tally in most instances, and that where they differ he has little trouble in bringing her round to his own.

Indeed, those walks (whilst Lady Cleaver and Mrs. Hassell take their after-dinner nap in the drawing-room, and Sir Lyster and his guests are prosing or debating, as the humour takes them, over their bottles in the dining-room) have come to be a recognised institution by these two, who have almost arrived at the point of calling each other friends ; and although Miss Daisy, in her white skirts and fluttering ribbons, is usually hanging on her mother's arm, her presence is not a sufficient check upon their conversation to render the fas-

inating intercourse innocuous. It is the first of September, and from nine o'clock in the morning—save for the three ladies and the child—Felton Hall has been empty of its inmates, and as Lady Gwynne considers it, excessively dull.

It is the first day that Auberon Slade has absented himself between breakfast and luncheon, and she misses him terribly. The pleasant little room in which they have been accustomed to sit together; looks so bare and deserted that she cannot stay there; she so much misses the sound of his rich, mellow voice, as he reads out some striking portion of the poem he is studying; or the bright, soft look of his eyes as she raises her own, and finds that they are fixed upon her.

She misses all this, with a kind of sinking, cold regret, and walks out of the room impatiently; and yet never guesses

why the absence of Auberon Slade should be of any moment to her.

Daisy is hard at work with her governess ; and fat Lady Cleaver is, as usual, in bed ; there is no resource but to join her aunt Hassell in the drawing-room. Aunt Hassell is a withered, half-dead, little woman, who jumps if the door is opened suddenly, and talks with a nervous tremble in her voice. She has a nature with which Lady Gwynne cannot sympathise, and of which she is, at times, rather intolerant ; but a yearning to talk to some one has come over her, and *faute de mieux*, she must talk to Mrs. Hassell.

The little, half-dead aunt has not much to say, not being in the habit of making pertinent or original remarks upon any subject ; but she knits, and trembles, and replies in monosyllables, and has nearly exhausted her listener's patience, until the

conversation somehow works itself round to Auberon Slade.

“How do you like him, aunt?” asks Lady Gwynne: a question, by the way, which she has become very fond lately of putting—*sub rosa*—to her various guests.

“Oh, I like him well enough, my dear, what I have seen of him. But I think he ought to take more care of himself.”

Mrs. Hassell’s remarks, when she does venture on any, always culminate in some unaccountable manner, on the question of health.

“Take care of himself,” echoes her niece, “but why—he is not ill?”

Mrs. Hassell’s head wags backward and forward oracularly, like the head of a toy mandarin.

It is her only answer; and at first sight it seems a startling one.

“What do you mean, aunt?” says

Lady Gwynne, in a tone of fluttering alarm.

“My dear, that young man is consumptive; he ought never to remain out after the dew has fallen. He will not last more than three or four years at the outside.”

“But who told you so?” in a very low voice.

“My daughter, Mrs. Jerrard, knows the family; they live close together in Blankshire. His sister died in a decline last year, and I am told that his health was very much affected by his disappointment.”

“What disappointment?”

“What! have you never heard? I thought all the world knew that Mr. Slade was engaged to Lady Mary St. Maur, and that she jilted him! Very badly she behaved, I am told; and that the young man fell quite ill from vexation at her conduct, and was ordered away from London in

consequence. And it will have a great effect upon his health without doubt ; for a disease like his is always, more or less, affected by the state of the mind."

"But are you sure he is consumptive?"

"My dear, no one could look at him and doubt it. Have you not seen how pale he is in the mornings, and flushed at night? That is always a symptom ; besides Jane tells me that all the family are the same, and that no one supposes that any of them will live to reach old age. Mr. Slade coughed a good deal last evening, after he came in from walking with you. Did you not hear him?"

"Yes ! yes—I did."

Mrs. Hassell does not observe the husky voice in which these words are uttered, nor notice the sudden shadow that falls across her niece's face.

Good old soul ! how should she ? *She*

has never been troubled with dangerous attentions during her married life ; nor encountered the smallest temptation to be disloyal to her Hassell. British virtue has doubtless a great deal to be proud of in her morality, and a very plain physiognomy still more. Anyway, she does not recognise the feeling, and would certainly not sympathise with it if she did.

What has a wedded heart in common with irregular pulsation, or a wedded cheek with burning, painful blushes ? They ought to have forgotten how such things are done.

“ Where are you going, my dear ? ” demands Mrs. Hassell presently, as Lady Gwynne, rising from her seat, moves slowly towards the door.

“ Only to see Daisy ; it wants but an hour to luncheon time, we shall meet then, ” — and she is gone.

She feels as though it would be a comfort to her, at that moment, to be assured of Daisy's health and spirits—to look upon her blooming face, and strong, stout limbs, and feel happy in the thought that sickness and death are not likely to step in here, and rob her of so valued a possession. And she stays by the child till luncheon time, watching her rough movements, and listening to her sturdy voice (for Miss Daisy is by no means of the sylph-like order of children) with positive relief; and sending up, every other moment, a little prayer of thanks that there is no scourge hanging over her youthful beauty, no hereditary taint to fear for her, and that she may rest with as much confidence as is permitted to mortality, on the hope of seeing her daughter attain perfected womanhood.

But when the melancholy mid-day meal

is concluded, and Lady Gwynne is once more released from the society of Mrs. Hassell, she wanders out of doors, and paces up and down beneath the walnut trees, and indulges in a profound melancholy. There is no Daisy now to divert her thoughts, and make her thankful (that young person having been again captured by her governess, and carried off a prisoner to the school-room) and she muses in a vague manner on the transitory nature of this world's happiness, until she succeeds in making herself thoroughly miserable.

So, lost in a reverie, she is standing, with the tears thickly gathered in her eyes, when some one steals up behind her on the grass, and says, "Boh!" right in her ear.

Of course she starts, and of course she laughs ; it is only natural she should laugh to find that Auberon Slade can think of no

more dignified manner in which to announce his presence to his hostess.

“Oh ! Mr. Slade, how you startled me ! How can you be such a baby ! Are they all here ?”

“No one but myself. After having walked over about a couple of dozen fields this morning, they propose to take as many more this afternoon. But I am quite done up, I could go no farther,” and he puts his gun and shot-belt down upon the grass as he speaks.

“Have you had good sport ?”

“Very fair. They’ll have made a capital bag by this evening ; Sir Lyster and Calvert appear indefatigable. I shot a couple of dozen brace myself.”

“And you are very tired.”

“Rather so. Such a sedentary life as I lead, unfits one for violent exercise ; but I shall get used to it after a day or two.

How cool it is out here. Come and sit down!" and as she complies with his request by taking possession of one of the garden chairs, he flings himself full length upon the ground beside her.

"Oh! don't sit there," she exclaims quickly, in a voice which, despite of herself, is full of entreaty. "I am sure the grass must be damp, there was a shower last night."

"Well, what of that?" in a tone of amusement, "it won't hurt me if it is. Nothing ever hurts me."

"But you have a cough," reproachfully.

"Where?" as though a cough might be taken all over the body.

"You coughed last night; I heard you."

"Oh, that is nothing, only a tickling in my throat. I always have that in the evenings."

"But you should be more careful indeed,

Mr. Slade ; coughs are such dangercus things, and you are rather used to them, I believe."

"Never had a bad one in my life."

"But—but—your family generally are delicate, are they not?"

"As strong as horses, every one of them. Who told you to the contrary, Lady Gwynne?"

She is rather confused now, but she blunders on womanfully.

"I heard—I understood—that is to say my Aunt Hassell informed me just now, that Miss Slade—your sister, that——"

"My poor sister whom we lost last year?" he says, interrogatively.

"Yes. Mrs. Hassell has been led to understand that she died in a consumption ; and I know it is catching and runs in families, and I thought perhaps—indeed, my aunt told me——"

“That we were a doomed race : and that frightened you.”

The voice in which he ends this sentence is a lowered voice. Intuitively his eyes turn to seek her own, but the search is unsuccessful ; Lady Gwynne’s eyes are looking quite in an opposite direction, and only one part of a very crimson cheek is visible.

“Were you thinking of that when I surprised you here just now ?”

No answer. Oh, Lady Gwynne ! why do you not give a quick indignant denial to his question ?

“Now I will tell you what are the real facts of the case,” says Auberon Slade, when he has gazed at her averted face for as long as decency will permit. “My poor sister died of sheer debility, the consequence of an operation which had been performed on her two years before, and

from the effects of which she had never recovered, and there was no symptom of consumption about her case ; neither have I ever heard of any member of our family dying of that disease."

"People do exaggerate so terribly," murmurs Lady Gwynne, already heartily ashamed that she has alluded to the subject.

"As for myself, I believe there has seldom been a stronger man than I am, or one more capable of enduring fatigue. Thinness is no proof of debility, and it would require the constitution of a horse to go through what I went through last season."

"But you knocked up under it!" she answers quickly.

"Yes! but more from the effects of mental, than physical exertion. Partly also from worry. As Mrs. Hassell appears to

be so conversant with my family diseases, she may also have proved competent to enlighten you concerning my private affairs."

"Oh, Mr. Slade! pray don't mention it; it is no concern of mine."

"Not if you could comfort me!"

"That is out of my power."

"I am not so sure of it. Oh! Lady Gwynne, if you knew how during the last few months I have longed for a sympathetic heart to which I could tell the troubles of my own, you would not be so quick, perhaps, to say you cannot comfort me."

"But your mother!—your sisters—you have them."

"*My mother! my sisters!*" with a most uncomplimentary emphasis on each term—
"Lady Gwynne! if you had seen my mother and sisters only once, you would never have made that suggestion! Mind! I don't want to say anything against them;

they are most excellent women in their way ; but as for going and telling them about my love affairs——Well ! You have not seen them, and that is your only excuse.”

“Then it *was* a love affair,” says Lady Gwynne, as she digs the point of her garden parasol deep into the turf.

“Oh, yes ! All the world knows that ! She was so beautiful !” (warming with his subject) “no man who saw her, hardly could have helped loving her. Lady Mary St. Maur !—you must have seen her photograph surely, in the shop-windows in town.”

“I don’t remember that I observed it ; but I know the name, of course. She attended the same Drawing-room as myself this year.”

“Did you see her ?” eagerly.

“No ! I didn’t”—coldly ; but Auberon Slade is too engrossed to see the coldness.

“ Oh ! she is a most glorious creature ; with big blue eyes and a perfect veil of golden hair—and the richest colouring—more like a goddess than a woman ;—and when she first led me on to believe she cared for me, I could not think it possible such good fortune could be mine.”

“ Well !——”

“ Well !”—(with a deep sigh)—“ the ending of it is no secret. I suppose she was either too young to know her own mind, or she grew tired of me ; but our engagement was broken off in a month.”

“ Too young to know her own mind—why ! she was one-and-twenty in May ! everybody can tell that from the Peerage,” interrupts Lady Gwynne, scornfully. Lenient as she is in general to the foibles of her own sex, she cannot resist casting this small stone at the supposed guilelessness of Lady Mary St. Maur.

“ Well, it little signifies—it comes all the same to me in the end. She threw me over—if that phrase pleases you better—and it is small consolation to me to believe her not free from blame. Because you see—I was very fond of her.”

There is so much simple pathos and humility in this last confession, and the voice sounds so unlike the *debonnair*, “ devil-may-care ” voice of Auberon Slade, that her tender womanly compassion is aroused in his behalf; and the little unworthy jealousy retreats into the background.

“ You suffered,” she says softly.

“ *Suffered!* If you could have seen me when I was at last convinced that all was over between us, you would indeed say that I had suffered. I did not think it possible that any one could suffer so much! But I have lived through it you see,”—with a careless laugh.

“Poor fellow!” The pitiful tones are not so low but that he catches them.

“Oh! how sweet it is to hear you say that! how very, very sweet to know that some one feels for me! If I could only make you understand how passionately I have longed for sympathy in this trial.”

“You will always have my sympathy, Mr. Slade.”

“I believe it!—but I want more; I want your affection! I want to know that I have a friend who cares for me, into whose bosom I may pour all my troubles without reserve; who will not get tired of me when I am in the vein for talking, nor interpret my silence as a lack of interest. Tell me, Lady Gwynne! Have I found such a friend? Is this the secret of the sympathy between us?”

“I believe that we are friends, and yet——”

“ You think there may be danger in such an intimacy. In some cases there might be, but not in ours. We are above the herd.”

“ With us it will be soul to soul—and nothing less,” she whispers:

“ And nothing less ! How like you to say and ‘ nothing *less*.’ An ordinary woman would have said, and ‘ nothing *more*.’ We shall understand each other. I knew it from the first.”

“ And you will have no secrets from me ?”

“ None ! nor you from me ; though our secrets promise to be very commonplace henceforward. We are neither of us in the first passionate flush of youth—for both of us, happily perhaps, that time is past, never to be recalled. And as for myself, I tell you candidly it is impossible I should ever love again as I have done. The power

of feeling is dead in me ; and that is what I meant, the evening that you read my character, when I told you that I was a cynic."

Why is there just the slightest shadow of disappointment apparent in her quick retort ?

"Of course ! and so much the better, as you say, for both of us, that it should be so. Love seldom brings anything but trouble in this world."

"You are right ! There is no love to be compared to a true and honest friendship. I cannot tell you how much happier I feel since I have spoken to you about this trouble. Your sympathy seems to have lightened my breast of half its load. That is the penalty you will have to pay for my confidence. You must bear half my troubles for me."

How she smiles upon his upturned face !

“And so I will, most gladly. But have you really never spoken to anyone of this before?”

“*Never!* I do not know anyone but yourself to whom I would speak of it.”

“But you know very little of me,” shyly; “how can you tell that I am trustworthy?”

“I will take it on credit. I was certain from the first hour I met you, that we should be friends, and that your friendship would be such an enjoyment to me as I have never experienced in this world before. A true affection, without passion, and without reserve—what feeling on this earth can equal it? It is not of this earth, it is a foretaste of heaven! Oh, Lady Gwynne, you have made me feel so proud, so happy, to possess the assurance of your sympathy, and the hope of being admitted to your confidence.”

“It is I that should be proud,” she answers, “to think that such a man as you, who have exchanged ideas with some of the profoundest intellects in Europe, should choose a simple woman like myself to be the depositary of your most private thoughts.”

“The marvel is, that you should take the trouble to be interested in them. I shall work with twice as good a heart now, when I remember that your eye will criticise my verse, and correct the emanations of my ungoverned spirit by the purer impulses of your own.”

“You expect too much from me.”

“I expect you to be all that you have promised—my guide, and counsellor, and friend ! There is no such influence for the benefit of man, as the influence of a high-souled and right-minded woman. I wish I could believe that I should never take

a step in the future that was not taken by your advice, and sanctioned by your approval."

She has never been spoken to in this manner by any one in the world before, and her heart glows with a new and irrepressible delight, which her features take no trouble to conceal.

"It is a settled thing, then, Lady Gwynne, is it not?" he says gaily, in conclusion. "We two have sworn eternal friendship, which, being interpreted, means, that you are to scold me whenever you see a good opening for it, and I am not to sit on the damp grass when you tell me not."

"Oh, please don't allude to that any more; it was so silly of me."

"Dear Lady Gwynne, if you knew how sweet your anxiety made you appear in my eyes, you would not say so. Silly,

was it? It is such silliness, my friend, that makes me feel at the present moment as if I could never be unhappy in this world again!"

CHAPTER IX.

DANGEROUS CONFIDENCES.

THE first dressing-bell has sounded for the Felton dinner, and yet Auberon Slade, without making any attempt at progression in his toilet, leans idly from his bedroom window, thinking over the conversation he has just held with Lady Gwynne. He feels so happy and light hearted in the retrospection of it, that he is astonished at himself. It is chiefly his vanity that is excited by her condescension and evident approval, but he confuses the feeling with another, greater, if more reprehensible ;

and his heart flutters beneath the pleasing consciousness of having had the power to awaken a reciprocal feeling in the heart of a woman, as incapable of immodesty as she would be of deception.

But Auberon Slade is a man of the world, who has mixed much with men and women, and noted the innumerable little means by which, when in pursuit of pleasure, they strive to silence the whispers of their conscience. He has no belief in what is called platonic affection ; and in the midst of his exultation a troubled doubt creeps every now and then across his mind, as he cannot divest it of the notion that he is on the road to fall in love with Lady Gwynne, and wonders to himself how it will all end. No thought of possible future guilt annoys him, for his love is yet too young and pure, not to be held sacred even by the lowest portion of his nature ; but

he foresees trouble, and perplexity—perhaps a bitter sorrow—and yet he has not strength of mind to fly whilst there is time.

“She is too good,” he muses, “too innocent (absurdly innocent indeed for a woman of her age), to dream of any evil consequence arising from our friendship; and whilst her suspicions sleep, I can hold even my thoughts in check. A look of consciousness from her eyes would be a spark to kindle the whole train, and blow us—heaven knows where. But the powers of hell themselves would shrink abashed before so pure a gaze as hers. Her fearlessness of harm, her perfect trust in me, must prove her safeguard; and in her position as a married woman she is as sacred in my eyes as I should wish my wife to be in those of other men. Ah! if Fate had only allotted such a woman to me, so

gay of heart and deep in feeling, so bold to censure and quick to understand, I might have been a very different fellow to what I am. Well ! it's no use thinking about it," with a sigh ; " she's not mine, and she never will be—the world is full of such cross purposes—and I must be thankful to have such a woman for my friend. It is not every man that can say as much as that."

But here the clanging of the second dinner bell startles Auberon Slade from his reverie, into the conviction that he has not yet commenced to dress, and must send down an apology to Lady Gwynne to account for the delay in his appearance.

Meanwhile, very different thoughts have been coursing through the mind of the other contractor of this new bond of friendship. She also has been light-

hearted upon retrospection, singing gaily, and smiling to herself with secret satisfaction. But no doubts have mingled with her joy, or they would have dispersed it. Her light-heartedness has been the light-heartedness of a child, for Auberon Slade does her no less than justice in his estimation of her purity of spirit and intention. Lady Gwynne is essentially an innocent woman—innocent, not because of her ignorance, for she is perfectly well aware that this world's heritage is sin and shame, and that to err is not the exception, but the rule. But she is guileless with respect to fearing, or even contemplating, such a destiny for herself. Other women may go wrong—God pity and forgive them!—but she, the wife of an easy-going husband, the mother of such a treasure as Daisy! that *she* could ever be led astray, or even look

upon another man with any feeling but that of the purest friendship, would be an incomprehensibility to her; a thing not to be understood; to try to understand which would be a species of disloyalty to the man she had sworn to keep to, and to honour.

She is blinder than Auberon Slade in this respect, but her blindness renders her less culpable. He, seeing the possible danger, attempts to brave it; she treads a path which inexperience causes her to regard as safe. They both trust to themselves too much, and to heaven too little, but they trust in different ways.

As to my heroine, at this juncture, she has no idea, but that what Auberon Slade has offered to her, she is free and able to accept,—an honest friendship!

Has he not told her, that from his hands she has nothing to fear? And so closely,

though unknowingly, has he already wound himself about her heart, that she is ready, even now, to trust him to the death.

Ah ! how often does love thus creep on us unawares, beneath the subtle guise of an interest, too pure to rouse alarm !

Lady Gwynne is very happy ; she does not trouble her head about the future, the present enjoyment is enough for her ; nor does she even stop to question why this sudden friendship should make her life seem brighter than it has ever done before. To know he thinks her worthy of his confidence : that he cares for her approval and advice ; and her affection makes his troubles less unbearable, is all sufficient for a great content ; and she revels in it as a flower in the sunshine.

She has unexpectedly been brought face

to face with a congenial spirit, and she feels as though existence had commenced afresh for her.

“Soul to soul—and nothing less.” Oh, the delight,—the ecstasy of knowing that she has a second soul who can understand the workings of her own, and lead it on with each renewal of their intercourse, to higher and to better things. For so, in her humility, she confidently believes that Auberon Slade is capable of leading her. And then she dons her most becoming robe for the edification of her second soul, and descends to the dining-room, flushed and triumphant as a young girl to meet her lover; more so, indeed, for the one is about to commence a journey, the charms of which she only knows by hearsay, whilst the other is like a traveller, who having long trod the barren, dreary desert, suddenly comes in sight of a fair city,

replete with all the luxuries he has so often sighed for, but never yet obtained.

Her gaiety continues throughout the evening, and for many evenings afterwards, for every interview she has with Auberon Slade renews it. The glance of intelligence he interchanges with her, when any allusion is made in public to those subjects which appeal to them most nearly: the peeps their conversations give her, of his home pursuits and former life, that life of which she now so much regrets she knows so little: the private history of the rise and progress of each poem, which he has never confided to any ear before her own: all these things, small in themselves, but great links in the chapter of their unfortunate attachment, draw this woman and this man nearer together, day by day.

And then their talks about the glorious career which seems to lie before him in

the future : those talks in which she speaks so seriously about his want of perseverance, and his self-esteem ; taking him to task with so much gentle love of him, and pride in his ability, and yet with such a profound sense of her own responsibility in being promoted to the post of counsellor, that she seems more like a mother reproving her son, than one equal talking to another.

But while he laughs at her remonstrances, they sink into his heart, and bring forth fruit days afterwards, when hers is broken.

It is about this time that he draws from her all the particulars of her marriage with Sir Lyster Gwynne. They are strolling in the shrubberies together after dinner, most of the company being scattered about the grounds of Felton Hall ; but these two, by some strange fatality, have departed from

the rest, and find themselves alone, with no more dangerous listeners to their conversation than the night-blowing flowers and the couchant birds.

“Now I want to hear all about Sir Lyster and yourself,” says Auberon Slade, as hand in hand they wander down the dusky paths ; “where you met him : how soon you fell in love : and how long you were engaged.”

“I assure you there is nothing to relate,” she replies, indifferently ; “the tale would be most commonplace.”

“But it will possess interest for me ; everything that concerns you, does. I should like to know every particular of your former life : where you were born, and how they mixed your pap, and where you went to school, and how many times you were whipped——”

“Oh ! Auberon !”

“Don’t you believe me, Gwendoline?”

They have come to call each other by their Christian names, they hardly know how; but as Mr. Slade insisted that he never thought of her, and never had thought of her as “Lady Gwynne,” and that when he said the words he did not mean them, it seemed no worse that he should be permitted to say what he did mean—at all events, when they were by themselves—as not to mean what he said. And it required but a very little persuasion to make her follow suit.

“Oh, yes, I believe you—with a few reserves. But what can I say about my marriage that will be interesting? It was such a quiet affair, and it took place so long ago.”

“How old were you at the time?”

“Nearly sixteen.”

“So young!”

“ Yes, I was young ; but very tall for my age. Well, if you really want to hear about it, I will tell you. My father’s name was Griffiths, he was the incumbent of Ynyscedwyn, the place where most of Sir Lyster’s Welsh property is situated ; and I lived all alone with him at the Vicarage, and—oh ! I was so happy !”

She little thinks how the sigh she consecrates to the memory of the happy past reveals the miserable contrast in the present.

“ You were his only child ?”

“ Yes ; my mother died soon after I was born. I can’t remember her, but I will show you her miniature if you will remind me of it. She looks so good and gentle. I think life would have been very different for me if she had lived.”

And here comes another deep sigh.

“ But your father ?”

“He died a few months before my marriage.”

“You have not yet told me about that.”

“Sir Lyster used to come down occasionally to look after his property,” she goes on hurriedly; “and as my father was the only gentleman resident in Ynyscedwyn, they naturally saw a great deal of one another, and of me—and after a while Sir Lyster told my father he wanted to marry me.”

“But I thought your father died first.”

“Yes, so he did; because I wasn’t engaged just then. I couldn’t make up my mind at first; I had seen so little of the world, you know. But it vexed my poor father sadly—my indecision did, I mean—and when he died, I was so miserable I didn’t seem to care what became of me, and so——”

“And so you *sacrificed* yourself,” says Auberon Slade, indignantly.

Lady Gwynne glances up at him, opening her eyes almost as though she were but just aroused from sleep; her pride is touched; she sees that she has gone too far.

“You quite misunderstand me,” she answers quickly; “there was no one to compel, not even to persuade me to marry Sir Lyster. I did it of my own free choice.”

“Yes?” incredulously.

“Yes!” with a little stamp of her foot. “It is not fair of you, Auberon, to try and misconstrue my meaning.”

“My dear Gwendoline! I have no wish to misconstrue it, my greatest desire is to believe you happy. Well! you found you were in love with Sir Lyster—let me hear the end of it.”

But his words seem to provoke more indignation than they are worth.

“ Oh ! how can you be so cruel, so unkind to me ; you must guess how it all happened. My father died, and left me penniless ; and I was so young and ignorant of the world, I thought there never could be greater happiness for me than complying with his last wishes. Besides Sir Lyster was very kind to me—as he always has been since,”—after a short pause.

“ Well, then, you are perfectly happy, and there’s an end of it,” says Auberon Slade.

“ There is no need for any of my friends to pity me,” she answers, gravely.

“ I see there is not. You love your husband, have a promising child, a high station in society, and a luxurious home. I for one, think you are a very lucky woman. There are not many marriages, entered into

so early in life as yours, that turn out as well."

But to this remark he receives no reply.

"You have made me quite envious," he goes on presently, "drawing such a picture of domestic happiness. You should have more consideration for my bachelor loneliness, Gwendoline."

But here he stops short, for his companion has sunk upon a bench near at hand, and he can hear, from the quick drawing of her breath, that she is weeping.

What man can stand the sight or sound of tears from the woman whom he loves? They torture him; he is not master of himself whilst they remain.

"Gwendoline! my poor Gwendoline!" cries Auberon Slade, as he takes a seat upon the bench beside her.

His arm is round her waist, his hand warmly pressed upon her own; in the dim

twilight he kisses her, not passionately or so as to make her fear, but calmly, almost reverentially, upon her smooth forehead and wet cheeks. Yet the colour flies to her face ; he feels the blood mount, hot and throbbing, beneath the impress of his lips.

“ No ! Auberon, no ! ” she says reproachfully, as, disengaging herself from his clasp, she tries to rise to her feet. But he prevents her.

“ Why should you shrink from me, dearest ? Have you not promised to regard me as a brother, and am I to be denied the comfort of consoling you as though you were my sister ? Come, Gwendoline ! sit down again, and believe that my affection for you is too sincere, to permit me to repeat any act by which I have had the misfortune to offend you ! ”

“ Oh, Auberon ! I am not offended.”

“Prove it then by unburdening your heart to me ; it will be as light again when I have shared its troubles. Dearest ! you can tell me nothing new ! I know that you are not happy in your married life.”

And in the twilight, with her hand locked in his, and believing that if she had a brother she should feel just so towards him, she tells him all.

CHAPTER X.

A FATAL DISCOVERY.

BUT where, all this time, the curious may inquire, are the eyes of Sir Lyster Gwynne?

They are in their usual place, and busy at their usual occupation; which is, passing over matters of real importance to his friends, to magnify the least trifle that affects himself; for if the character of Sir Lyster Gwynne has not already made itself apparent in these pages, it may be summed up here in a few words. He is selfish, has been so from his cradle, and

will be so to his grave ; and it is wonderful, on close inspection, how few lives are not so ; and this selfishness blinds his eyes to the feelings of everyone except himself, and even prevents his being jealous.

He loves his wife, after a fashion ; that is, whilst she gives in to him in everything (and Lady Gwynne's training commenced so early, and has continued so long, that it is an exceptional case when she is not both good and gentle with her husband) ; but let her oppose him in the smallest matter, by making an appointment that crosses with his plans, or keeping him waiting five minutes for his dinner, or going to church when he wishes her to ride on horseback, and she is made to remember it for days afterwards, by the alteration in his demeanour. For Sir Lyster is sulky as well as selfish, the two qualities usually going together.

So long as Lady Gwynne's intimacy with Auberon Slade does not clash with the baronet's meals or other comforts, he will not see it, or seeing, interfere ; for he is too sure of himself, of his position, and his wife's docility, to believe it possible that she would dare to play him false, for the sake of the fairest face, or proudest intellect that ever graced this earth.

Other men's wives may bring them to shame (and to hear Sir Lyster discuss women over his wine is to impress one with the idea that he does not believe in the fidelity of any of the sex), but that *his* wife ; the woman he has honoured with his hand ; on whom he has bestowed one of the oldest titles in England ; that *Lady Gwynne* should presume even to imagine another man preferable to himself, does not enter into his calculations ; it is a possibility he has never taken the trouble to think about ;

it would be lost labour ; it is a thing simply that *could not be*.

And should Sir Lyster Gwynne ever have the misfortune to be dragged into the Divorce Court, I doubt not that this apparently amiable quality in his disposition, this perfect trust, and incredulity of wrong, will be made good use of by his counsel, and brought forward as an additional proof of the worthlessness of those who could betray him. Such comments have been passed in that court before now, on conduct, which so handled, may seem blameless ; but which, if impartially sifted, would shine forth in its true colours, as a specimen of the grossest selfishness, and neglect of the duties which a man takes upon himself, when he swears before God's altar to protect and cherish a woman until death.

But if Sir Lyster's self-bound eyes are

incapable of perceiving the danger of so continued and intimate an intercourse between his young wife and a fascinating clever man like Auberon Slade, others are not so blind.

The little world of Felton Hall, copying the big world in this particular, discusses the fact freely, and puts the very worst construction upon all its bearings.

They do not dare allude to the subject before Auberon Slade, but in his absence their comments, which are, perhaps, less censorial than envious, pass without reserve, and as is usual in such cases, the opinions as to the probable upshot of his friendship with their hostess, are almost unanimous.

It is so seldom that men believe it possible that a woman can go half-way to her destruction, and there, scared at what must follow, stop short, and with many tears retrace her steps. With them, if she offend

in one tittle of the law, she must be guilty of all ; they little think, how many, whom they, perhaps, respect and honour, have retraced in like manner their weary path. And who are they to censure ? They, who scarcely with one exception, have gone the whole way ; and expect, on their return, to be received with open arms.

Prodigals, who have filled their bellies with the husks that the swine refuse to eat, and yet demand to be clothed with the robe of purity, and to have the ring of faith placed on their hand.

The men at Felton Hall, who do not know Gwendoline Gwynne, wish that they had a few thousands laid upon the issue of her intimacy with Auberon Slade. The men who *do* know her, to wit, Major Calvert and Mr. Lawrence, look very grave when the subject is mentioned, and think of it for many hours afterwards.

Calvert pulls his long moustache, and wishes to Heaven that Slade would go back to town, or that he had the moral courage to risk a quarrel with him by entreating him not to abuse the hospitality he has shown no hesitation in accepting; but Mr. Lawrence, who has been the true friend of Lady Gwynne for many years past, watches her closely, with the firm resolution to speak out boldly as soon as he shall have a reasonable excuse for doing so.

The one may be anxious for her worldly reputation, but the other is trembling for her soul.

Meanwhile the object of their solicitude, as though no pit were yawning for her unsuspecting feet, goes on her way rejoicing. Yes! literally rejoicing; for, although she has not yet stooped to recognise them, the flowers of love are springing all about her path, and no wretched doubts have intruded

themselves to mar the perfect serenity of her late-found heaven.

She wakes each morning to a sense of new and ever-increasing happiness, for she is about to meet him. She lies down to rest each night, calm and satisfied, beneath the knowledge that with the morning, joy will return.

No hot and restless dreams disturb her slumbers as they do his ; she sleeps like an innocent child, too full of content with the present to wish for greater pleasures in the future.

If she is troubled, vexed, or worried with the day's occurrences, she flies to Auberon Slade for consolation. If she is pleased, she seeks him still, that he may share her pleasure.

She reads his manuscripts, suggests ideas to him ; even attempts, beneath his supervision to string ideas together for herself ;

and does it all unconsciously, without a notion that the scales will ever fall from their eyes, and they shall look other to each other than they do ; until one fatal morning she taps at the door of his sitting-room and entering, finds it is deserted.

It is a day on which he has decided to give the partridges a holiday (for Auberon Slade's love of sport has waxed rather cold of late) and his books and papers are loosely scattered on the table, bearing evidence that it is not long since he has quitted them.

Lady Gwynne advances boldly into the room and sits down in the poet's chair, for the friends have grown so familiar with each other by this time, that he will not be surprised on his return, to find her waiting for him.

But her attention is soon arrested by the sheet of foolscap paper which is spread out before her ; the record evidently of Auberon

Slade's latest thought, since the ink with which he has scribbled them is scarcely dry.

Lady Gwynne takes up the paper eagerly ; she is always proud to read what he has written, however hastily it may have been transcribed ; but as she peruses this, her eyes dilate—her colour quickens—and she forgets to criticise in the deep interest the words awaken—

*“ I give up all for thee ! I strive no more
To conquer an inexorable fate,
Or laugh at love that seems to come too late,
For I am fond no longer—I adore !

“ Oh ! idol of my worship, far too fair
In the great soul that flashes from thine eyes,
I triumph that I win so great a prize,
I tremble ! when I think how much I dare.

“ For a vast gulph yet yawns 'twixt thee and me,
Which God's set laws forbid us both to span :
Love dimmed our eyes when first our love began,
With happy tears that would not let us see !

* The author wishes to acknowledge the obligation under which she lies for the following verses to the pen of a literary friend.

“The same love dries them now, and we behold
The solemn finger pointing out the warning,
Sweet if the night be, ah ! beware the morning,
Lest horrors curse the loves that both enfold !

“Oh ! I have dreamed of love, but never known,
The wondrous glories that I welcome now !
The pain and sorrow written on thy brow
A strange, new, other life to me have shown !

“For, from the fires of suffering thou hast come
A well tried angel to my lonely heart ;
I thank thee that thou bidst me take my part ;
And gild the shadows of thy darker home.

“Can love be curst where love has so much blest ?
Can heart be foul where heart can purify ?
Oh ! if it be so—Let us rather die,
And love where perfect spirits are at rest !

“But not in vain our hearts have sorely bled,
And groaned through all this wilderness of fate,
The cloud has light behind it, Darling wait !
And strength through weakness shall be perfected !

“Then draw me closer, closer to thee, dear,
Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed,
My life and thine, inevitably mixed,
We take our destiny and do not fear.

“Yes ! all of self has sweetly died in me,
Thy noble heart is beating in my breast,
No one shall steal it now ! There let it rest,
And know, dear love, that I am lost in thee.”

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She reads these verses over, one—two—three times ; and then, as the full meaning of them, and of all it discloses to her, bursts upon her mind, a feeling of suffocation overpowers her ; the room turns round ; it seems as though she could not breathe ; and still holding the paper in her hand, she rises, almost unconsciously, to her feet, and stands by the table, grasping one corner of it with fierce energy in the vain attempt to steady thus her trembling limbs.

Her eyes are open now ; she can no longer close them to the truth, nor pretend to mistake the feeling with which Auberon Slade regards her—with which she regards him in return—for, with the conviction of his love, there comes the knowledge—heralded by a bright hot blush of passionate pleasure—that she loves him too ; and happy, grateful tears, whose course is directed by

the curved channels of her smiling mouth, run down the woman's face.

“Happy, grateful!” I seem to hear some voices cry—“when the creature should have been overwhelmed by shame and misery! What sort of heroine is this for whom our sympathy is demanded?”

Patience! dear Moralists! the “creature” shall be as miserable as ever your rigid virtue could desire before long! do not grudge her, her short hour of triumph now! It is nature that prompts her to glory in the knowledge that she has gained her lover; and nature will be the direst avenger of her weakness when she has resigned him.

A quick, short footstep; a beam of sunshine entering the room; a familiar hand laid on her shoulder, and the voice of her Fate sounds in her ear again.

“Well! thief! rifling my possessions as usual! What business have you to come

and make all this disturbance amongst my papers. Who gave you leave? Was ever such a woman?"

She does not answer him, but the shoulder upon which he leans is not quite steady, and the paper in her hand is fluttering.

"What have you got there? Oh!—*that!* Well!"—after a brief pause, and in a lowered voice, "What do you think of it?"

"I do not know."

"Cannot your heart prompt you, Gwendoline?"

"Oh! Auberon! I never thought—I never dreamt—that it could come to this!"

"What a short-sighted mortal you must be then!"

"Am I?"

It seems as though she could not speak except in monosyllables; the idea still so wonderful—so new—to her, that after each contemplation of it, she relapses into the

same sort of hazy dream. But his voice rouses her again.

“You are not angry with me, darling?”

“Angry!—oh! Auberon!—” and then she turns and their eyes meet, and for the first time feed upon each other’s fire; searching far, far down into unfathomable depths, until the hot blood mounts to either face, and their spirits rush together and are one.

And then she closes her eyes, and leans weakly back against the table; whilst with a deep-drawn sigh he turns away, and walks to the further end of the apartment.

But after a moment, Lady Gwynne recovers herself, and her spirit of mischief is in the ascendant.

“What about Lady Mary St. Maur?” she says slyly.

“Dash Lady Mary St. Maur,” is the impatient reply of Auberon Slade, as he

returns to her side. "Do you imagine that I am going to waste my time fretting after an arrant coquette, who must have deceived me from the very first? No, Gwendoline! the woman who holds me must be the woman who loves me! though I doubt whether I should have been able to avoid falling in love with you, if you had cared for me or not. You are a very witch, and I was your victim from the first moment that I saw you!"

"But how do you know I care for you?"

"It would be useless to deny it. I read the blessed truth in every look and tone and gesture."

"Why! what a fool I must be, then, to give the world so false an impression of my feelings!"

She speaks in jest, but he answers her as though she were in earnest.

“Don’t say that, Gwendoline! If you only knew how much it pains me! I cannot bear a doubt thrown on my entire belief in your affection for me.”

“It cannot be of so much moment to you as all that!”

“It is all the moment in the world to me. It is my life, my everything! Oh, darling! if you only knew *how much* I love you; how my soul is welded with your own; how I exist but in your living, and should die were you to cease to care for me; you would not dare to jest on such a subject. Gwendoline, like many other men, I have wasted my affections upon a dozen frivolous attachments, but I have never yet given myself away, heart, body, and soul, to one woman, as I do now to you. I swear it! Won’t you believe me?”

She does not answer—but she turns upon him eyes, full of a new tremulous

light, which say more than it would be in the power of her tongue to express. She has never had such an avowal made to her before ; (remember that, you who would too quickly condemn her short-lived happiness) she has never heard such words, nor felt such deep emotion, nor deemed it possible that such a love existed, excepting in the absinthe-heated imaginations of romance-writers.

And the knowledge that it is hers, and Auberon Slade's the hand to hold it to her, is almost too much to bear ; and, hardly sensible of what she does, she puts him feebly from her, and turns her face away.

“ Gwendoline, don't do that, for heaven's sake ! Tell me that I am not mistaken, that you have not been playing with me as *she* did—or I shall go mad !”

He pulls her almost roughly by the dress, he forces her to turn and look at him, he

extracts her answer by a determined and commanding manner—an assumption of superiority, the first exercise of the yoke she loves to feel upon her.

“I *will* be answered, Gwendoline ; I demand it as a right ! Child, have pity on me, and put me out of my suspense.”

The tone of supplication stirs her heart, already far too full ; and the tender eyes she bends upon him, are melting with excess of love.

“You *know* I love you—that I have loved you from the first, although I have had no name in which to clothe the feelings that possess me. My heart and soul are yours, Auberon ; do with them as you think best ! Henceforth you must be responsible for what I am.”

He tries to hold her, but, with down-cast looks and burning cheeks, she breaks

from him and rushes to the sofa. In another moment he is seated by her side.

“Gwendoline ! dearest ! Tell me that again ! Say that you *are* mine ; that you *will be* mine—now and for ever !”

He has her hand in his, his arm about her waist, her whole figure lies in his embrace.

“There is no choice in the matter, Auberon. Were I to cease to be yours, or you to care for me, I could not live.”

“My own !”—and the sunny locks come nearer and nearer, until they rest upon her bosom ; whilst the warm impassioned light in the uplifted eyes burns into her very soul.

Years afterwards, when that poor bosom is as chill as death beneath the spirit’s disappointment, the remembrance of those

eyes, as she looked down upon them, will have the power to kindle in it a ray of temporary warmth.

“’Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.”

And who, in his senses, would exchange the memory of dead delights, however bitter, for the humiliating knowledge that the common lot has passed him over ?

“ Oh, my God ! my God ! ” she muses, and not irreverently, as her heart pants beneath the weight of its dear burden ; and with closed eyes she lays back her head upon the sofa cushions, and believes that so much happiness must kill her. “ How fair this world is ! how beautiful the gifts with which Thou hast adorned Thy creatures ! What have I done to deserve so much felicity, such an illimitable blessing, such a vast arena of bliss, as I inherit in the possession of this love ! I cannot

contemplate it ; the very prospect takes my breath away. I shall die beneath my load of happiness. Oh, Auberon ! my love ! my dearest, dearest love ! what can I do to pay you back for all your goodness to me ?”

She does not say this, but it runs through her mind as she sits on the sofa, and when a chance word rouses her from her reverie, she starts up with a cry that is more of pain than pleasure.

“ Oh ! Auberon, Auberon ! don’t tell me again that you love me ; it is impossible—I cannot believe it.”

“ You must believe it, darling !” raising himself that he may see her face ; “ it is your fate and mine.”

She looks at him ; her breath comes hardly, her lips quiver, and the temptation is too great to be resisted ; he raises his own to meet them.

But the action appears to offend her, for, like an arrow from a bow, she darts from his side, and turns the handle of the door.

“Unkind !” he says reproachfully.

At that word her steps are arrested, and she lingers on the threshold, nervously twisting the handle backwards and forwards, and tracing out the pattern of the carpet with her foot.

“Gwendoline !”

He speaks in a whisper ; but there is something in the tone of his voice which almost makes her heart stop.

She lifts her head, and sees him standing just where she has left him, holding out his arms to her.

“Come to me, darling ! Don’t leave me like this, or you will leave me wretched. Here is your true home—*here !* where your heart is in safe keeping ; don’t be afraid to

let your lips seal the confession that they themselves have made !”

She hesitates a moment, but only a moment ; for that false courage which makes a woman imagine that her sacrifice of self is glorious only according to its completeness, comes over her, and, with a cry, she turns and runs back to the shelter of his breast. He folds her to it ; he showers kisses upon her lips, her cheeks, her forehead ; he calls her by every endearing name that he can think of ; and she clings to him as though in this world they were never again to be separated, and is divinely happy.

But as they stand thus together, forgetting all the world except themselves, a shriek runs through the house—a shriek that reaches from attic to basement, followed by a dull sound of something falling ; and with eyes made wild by sudden horror, and lips that have parched even as they lay

against his own, Lady Gwynne disengages herself from her lover's arms, and with the hurried exclamation,—“My God! it is Daisy!” rushes from the apartment.

CHAPTER XI.

AT DAISY'S SIDE.

THE maternal instinct is not at fault ; for though the fell scream that rings through Felton Hall is from the lips of a passing domestic, the sight that occasions it is the sight of Daisy, who (like an inveterate hoyden as she is) has been riding on the balustrades of the upper landing, and having, in an evil moment, missed her balance, fallen an unconscious heap upon the tessellated pavement of the hall.

There she lies, white and senseless, looking as though she were already released

from the burden of life ; and when Auberon Slade, who has followed Lady Gwynne as quickly as he may, comes upon the scene, of the whole group that has surrounded the child's body, he finds the mother the only one sufficiently collected to give any directions.

Her cheek is indeed blanched, as though the mortal agony had taken possession of herself, and the fresh, rosy colour of the lips, so lately pressed against his own, has faded to a leaden hue ; but still her eye is steadfast, and she speaks with calmness.

“ Mr. Slade, will you help me to carry her up to her bed ? ”

He makes no answer, except by tenderly lifting the child's body, and bearing it upstairs again—those stairs on which she had been so gleefully playing when she met with, what seems to the spectators, to be her death.

But as he lays her on her own cot, in her mother's dressing-room, Lady Gwynne turns to him again.

"I must have a doctor, and at once—Dr. Stewart, of Willington. Will you see that the messenger is dispatched?"

"I will go myself, if you will let me."

"Oh, Auberon, do!" and a warm, grateful light irradiates her sad eyes. "I shall like to remember that you fetched him, though it will be of no use. Oh! my God!"

"Don't say that, Gwendoline!—don't think it! Remember whilst there is life there is hope."

"Sir Lyster should be told."

"I will send some one to find him. I will do everything that is needful, if you will promise me to keep your heart up."

"I will—for your sake—so long as it is possible. And now go, pray go! every moment is of consequence."

And so he leaves her, hanging tearless and horror-struck over the unconscious body of her child, whilst her attendants cluster round and do all they can to persuade her that poor Daisy's fate is sealed.

He orders the fastest horse in the stables to be saddled, and he rides as speedily as it will carry him ; first down to the field where he guesses Sir Lyster and his friends will be discussing their luncheon, and then (having communicated the bad news to the father, who appears wonderfully unaffected by it) to Willington to fetch the doctor ; both places lying in the same direction. He comes back, heated but triumphant, having succeeded in bringing Dr. Stewart to Felton Hall much sooner than he expected ; but here follow several hours of miserable suspense, in which he can neither gain admittance to Lady Gwynne, nor hear definite news of the child's condition, and

everybody seems to have forgotten that by virtue of the exertion he has made on their behalf, he is entitled to more consideration from his host and hostess than the rest of their guests.

The luncheon bell rings, but he has no heart to go down into the dining-room; and the afternoon wears on, and the shadows on the grass begin to lengthen, and still Dr. Stewart and Lady Gwynne are closeted together in the dressing-room; and the only answer he can obtain to his continuous enquiries after Daisy's welfare is, that she has not yet regained her consciousness. His heart bleeds for Lady Gwynne, and all that she is suffering; but the morning's cloud, however painful, has no power to obscure the morning's exultation, and left to himself and the dominion of his own thoughts, Auberon Slade is very excited and very triumphant.

He really loves this woman : loves her with an amount of passion, mingled with a purer and more lasting feeling, such as astonishes himself ; and he fully believes that he has accomplished his destiny, and reached the utmost tether of his capability for forming an attachment. It is true that he does not see the end of it, nor dare contemplate to what his avowal of the morning may lead ; but he is willing to leave all that, to what he calls chance, and let events take their ordinary course.

Meanwhile she loves him, and he loves her ; and that fact is all-sufficient to render him blissfully contented, and incapable of doing any work for the remainder of the day.

But is it possible, that the fact of her being the wife of Sir Lyster Gwynne, and the possession of her by himself—without

the commission of a gross crime and huge dishonour—a simple impossibility, has no power to disturb the man's serenity, and turn his triumph into chagrin and disappointment?

Not at the moment ; for he has not yet made up his mind to sully her purity, nor use any base persuasions to make her quit her present position in society ; he would shrink with apparent horror from such proposals made to him, and say that death were preferable to seeing the woman whom he loves, disgraced before the world—and he would firmly believe that he meant all he said.

Some scruples must pass through his mind, however ; some twinges assail his conscience ; as he remembers how her kisses scorched his lips, and rendered him more weak of purpose ; but if so, he dismisses them with the false argument, that it is

not so much his fault that matters have come to such a crisis, as the fault of the idiot, who, having secured so fascinating a woman, can leave her (void of love and tenderness and sympathy), exposed to the attentions of a man like himself.

And as these thoughts course through the mind of Auberon Slade, he looks with considerable satisfaction at the fair, flushed face, lighted up with the best of beauty, the Beauty of Intellect, which the mirror casts back upon him, and evinces no sweet surprise born of humility, that Lady Gwynne should have succumbed to him so easily.

“Poor darling!” he murmurs—the very adjective he uses being expressive of the self-gratified state of his feelings—“to be in the clutches of such a fool as Sir Lyster! How I wish it were in my power to rescue her with credit to herself. There

is not much doubt whether I could make her happy. Well, it is not every man who could attract and secure, the love of such a woman, and since I have gained I shall take good care not to let it slip again."

Between such flattering reveries as this, and the task of opening his door to listen or make enquiries, every time a footstep passes by his chamber, the long afternoon wears itself away for Auberon Slade, and the cool of the evening sets in. Within the sick room—which is on the same floor as his own—with the exception of voices in murmured converse, or an occasional order whispered on the threshold, all seems hushed as death; and the only answer the servants return to his questions is, that—"Miss Daisy is as bad as bad can be, and the parson has been sent for to see their lady."

And, indeed, as the great dinner-bell clangs out harshly at its usual hour, and Auberon Slade, anxious to meet and speak with Sir Lyster on the condition of his child, is, with some alacrity, descending the principal staircase, he meets Mr. Lawrence on his way up; and the two men stop and shake hands.

“I was sorry to hear that you had been sent for,” says Auberon Slade. “I am afraid it means that matters are at their worst.”

“I hope not,” rejoins the other, gravely; “although I agree with you that in most cases of sickness, the appearance of the priest is the forerunner of death. People try doctors, physic, friends, everything before the one thing needful, and it is only when earthly aid fails them that they have recourse to the consolations of religion. I suppose it does not often strike

them that were they to try those first, they might experience no need of the other."

At this address Auberon Slade twists about uneasily, and can only murmur a kind of congratulatory acquiescence.

"You are an old friend of Lady Gwynne's, I believe, Mr. Lawrence? You have known her a long time?" he says, at last.

"A very long time, Mr. Slade. Long enough to have earned the privilege to speak openly to her, whenever I see any cause to fear lest her generous, and kindly, yet thoughtless inclination, should lead her astray!"

"Oh, yes,—of course—a great privilege, I am sure," replies his companion, rendered unaccountably anxious by some peculiar inflexion of the speaker's voice to get away. "And so you really think there is some hope for the poor child?"

“I met Mr. Fuller, of Leighton, who was sent for to consult with Dr. Stewart, just outside the gates, and he tells me that she has opened her eyes and spoken, and is evidently sensible. But she will doubtless require great care for some days to come, and I suppose it will be a considerable time before the medical men will be able to determine what amount of injury she may not have caused herself.”

“Poor Lady Gwynne! How she must be suffering!”

“I am sure she is; but there must be some good reason for the discipline. These trials, apparently so unnecessary, do not come to us by *chance*, Mr. Slade.”

“I suppose not. Don’t let me detain you from her.”

And the men separate for their respective destinations.

On entering the dining-room, Auberon

Slade is disgusted to find—the covers having been removed—that everyone is eating and talking with as good a will as though no dark shadow hung over the family of Gwynne; Sir Lyster himself—who at least might have been supposed in some measure to feel the danger of his only child—being the loudest talker, and heartiest eater there.

“Come on, Slade!” he shouts, as our hero makes his appearance on the threshold, “we haven’t cleared off everything yet; but we shall if you don’t make haste. Where have you been hiding yourself all the day, man! We wanted you in the billiard-room sadly this afternoon. Calvert and I have a match on against Penryhn and Lowder—for a pony—and there was only little Jack Pinner to mark. Calvert and I had scored fifty against their forty-

five when the dinner-bell rang. We must finish it this evening."

Auberon Slade disdains to evince any interest in the proceedings of Sir Lyster.

"I am glad to hear your child is out of danger," he says, pointedly, as he slips into his accustomed place at table.

"Out of danger! of course she is. Never was in any danger that I believe. Children of that age are always bumping themselves, and seldom the worse for it."

"But it was a terrible fall. The consequences might have been very serious."

"Oh, yes, doubtless! but there is a long distance between what is, and what *might have been*. (Penryhn, my dear fellow, don't keep all the bottles to yourself down at that end of the table, I implore you!) And then Lady Gwynne, like most women, always makes such a fuss

over things—she'd have you believe that every accident will end in death."

Auberon Slade cannot trust himself to take up cudgels in her defence ; he only throws an angry glance towards his unconscious rival, and grows red as he bends over his plate. But fat Lady Cleaver, who oozes with the milk of human kindness, tries to do the absent justice.

"I thought Lady Gwynne behaved admirably on this occasion," she interrupts the discussion of her *vol-au-vent* to say. "I am sure I never could have displayed so much strength of mind, for the servants were perfectly helpless, and so was the governess ; and if it had not been for Lady Gwynne's coolness and forethought, I think we should all have gone out of our minds."

"I have no doubt you would !" replies Sir Lyster, with a look of intelligence to-

wards the rest of the company. But Auberon Slade throws a grateful glance upon her florid, inexpressive countenance, and sees more beauty in it than he has ever done before.

“Well, Lady Gwynne has her consolations,” continues the host after a moment’s pause. “She has her doctor and her parson, and what woman could want more. She’ll sit up till midnight discussing symptoms with the doctor, and talking prayers with the parson, and go to bed under the firm conviction that she is either a martyr or a saint! He! he! he!”

“I was not aware that Lady Gwynne was given to Methodism,” remarks Calvert, rather sarcastically.

“My dear boy, they’re all given to it! Let them call themselves what they may—High Church, Broad Church, Low Church, or No Church—women invariably send for

the parson at the same time as the doctor, determined, with their usual obstinacy, that if they can't stay in this wicked world any longer, they will at all events get a lift to a better."

"I should think they were scarcely to blame for that," says Auberon Slade fiercely.

"Of course not! who says they are, so long as they don't insist upon my sharing their devotions! But you're a sentimental fellow, Slade; doesn't it make your mouth water? doesn't it make you wish you had adopted either of the paying trades? Why, yours is a fool to it, man! You can only reach the women's ears through your printed words; whereas, if you'd but known it, instead of sitting at this present moment before a plate of venison (with which you don't seem to be making much progress in my opinion), you might have been in

Lady Gwynne's dressing-room, sprinkling drops of eau-de-cologne on Daisy's forehead, and drops of comfort in her mother's ear. Which would you prefer—eh ?”

Auberon Slade will not answer. He longs to tell his host what he thinks of him, but the force of etiquette (and what a powerful force it is to hinder men !) restrains him, and he keeps silence, glowering darkly at the meats set before him, and seizing the first opportunity to escape from the presence he has grown to detest, and to the solitude of his own room. And then he paces up and down, disconsolate, and almost in despair !

Oh, what a fate it is, to which this woman is condemned ! this woman whom he loves so ardently ; whom, he thinks, he holds in so much honour and esteem. To be tied to a clown, as utterly unsympathetic with her most sacred feelings as he

is with her intellectual pursuits ; who holds her—"Something better than his dog ; a little dearer than his horse."

The thought oppresses, it almost maddens him. He is capable of any act of rashness or of sin, that may bring some liberty to her, as, lonely and restless, he walks up and down his room that night.

He hears Dr. Stewart and Mr. Lawrence leave the house ; receives the intelligence that, though immediate danger is over, there is still in the child's state great reason for alarm ; thinks of *her*, alone, and full of melancholy foreboding, watching painfully by the bedside of Daisy, and feels as though, at the risk of her fair name, and in utter contempt of all the conventionalities of society, he must rush into that darkened dressing-room, and throw himself down at her feet, and give her the assurance of one heart's fidelity.

But of course he does not do it. Which of us ever does act upon his impulse in matters which defy the code of this world's morals? We break God's laws with the greatest impunity; but to outrage the laws of Mammon (unless indeed we have made up our minds first to abjure it), is quite another thing!

But Auberon Slade does do something; he sits down at his table, and writes and seals the following words, and bribes her maid to take them to her door:—

“DARLING,—Pray send me tidings of yourself and Daisy. My heart bleeds for you: I would give the world to be by your side. Thank you again and again for your assurance of this morning. I have been another man since I received it.”

He sees the modest little missive carried to her threshold; hears the low knock that

gains admission for it, and watches eagerly for a reply. It comes at last—it seems “at last” to him, although it is not ten minutes before the servant returns with it in her hand—a note as tiny as his own, but which he receives with the feverish welcome of a lover, and locks his door before he opens. But the contents are nothing but a grievous disappointment to him.

“Thank you for your sympathy. Daisy is better, and I am not at all tired. But pray, *pray* forget all that I said and did, this morning! I was weak, wicked, mad; I wronged both you and myself; I see it plainly now! And if you really care for me, go home again before I leave this room; I do not feel as if I could ever go downstairs whilst you are there.”

Auberon Slade is thunderstruck; it seems as though all his hopes (indefinite as they

were) had been quenched in a moment, and he sits, for an hour, by his table, hanging over her words, and devouring them with his hungry eyes.

And then he crushes the paper into his pocket, and laughs a low laugh of pique and disappointed vanity, and prepares to join the other men in the billiard-room.

“Like the rest of them,” he thinks bitterly as he does so, “ready enough to lead a man wrong, but afraid to bear the consequences of sinning. Well, as she wishes it, I suppose I must go, but it will not be long before she repents of having asked me to do so.”

But he says nothing on the subject of his proposed departure that night ; and his companions remark afterwards that they have never known Slade make himself so witty and agreeable as he did on that occasion.

So little do men’s outward actions

in general correspond with their inmost thoughts.

Yet could he pierce the mystery that envelopes the note he has received, Auberon Slade would not be so hard in his judgment upon Lady Gwynne.

She loves him—it is not too strong an expression to say that she adores him—that, her capability for feeling and for suffering being twice as strong as his, the fatal attachment which she has conceived for him, will weigh her down, even to the grave, when, if not forgotten, it shall have lost all its sting for Auberon Slade.

But it is the very intensity, the force of her affection that causes her to fear ; that makes her feel that she cannot live in his presence, and keep up the airy sham of friendship which has hitherto deceived them both ; nor is she the woman to drag out a life of deception, and live contented with

herself. Amidst the solitude, and the darkness, and the dread of Daisy's sick chamber, she has come to this conclusion : that either she must be Auberon Slade's, or he must go. She glances round for help on every side, but there is none. She lifts her eyes to heaven, aided by the pious words that have been breathed into her ear, and there she finds it, (though for her dull eyes in still imperfect measure), but help at least to see the Right and strive to follow it.

And then she feels that he *must go*!—her treasure—her love—the sum-total of her life—that she must violently separate from him. And she writes the supposed fiat on her knees, and amidst a storm of blistering tears.

A thousand times that night, watching by her child's bed, whilst her husband snores melodiously in the adjoining room, does she revolve the words she used, in her own

mind, and ask herself if they were really necessary ; if so great a sacrifice were literally demanded of her ; whether she might not, with impunity to her own soul and his, keep Auberon Slade as her dear friend ; learn with and from him, and find her life's happiness in devotion to his welfare. The voice of Satan opposes itself to the strong voice of conscience, and half, at times, persuades her that she may ; but her mind is undecided, and her will is wavering ; and for very knowledge of her own weakness, she dare not choose the path that seems to her most pleasant.

A foolish fortune predicted for her by a wandering gipsy in her childhood, that she should live to be twice married, keeps ringing in her ear, and making her thoughts all confusion ; until she grows ashamed of so much folly, and dashes cold water on her forehead, and fears her brain is wandering.

And Sir Lyster, who in general a cannonade would hardly wake, is wakened early on the following morning, by the sound of low sobs by his bedside, and the touch of tears upon the cheeks.

“What the devil!” he exclaims impatiently, as he turns upon his pillow with a grunt; “why can’t you come to bed, or behave like a Christian?”

“Oh, Lyster! Lyster!” she cries, laying her sweet, smooth cheeks, against cheeks considerably inflamed from the debauch of the previous evening, “tell me—have I been a good wife to you? is there anything in which I have particularly failed in doing my duty?”

Sir Lyster raises his purple visage from the pillow, and stares at her, as though he thought she had gone mad.

“Is the child dead?” he says roughly.

“Dead! My God! no. What made you

think of such a dreadful thing? She has been sleeping ever since midnight. But I ——I know that I am often tiresome and thoughtless, and determined to have my own way, and you must feel disappointed in me. Oh! Lyster, tell me if there is any way in which I can please you better, any little thing which I can do to make you happy; work me, use me in any manner you can think of, so that I may earn the title of a good and faithful wife.”

She has buried her repentant face into his pillow; she cannot see the look of undisguised astonishment with which this creature of no sentiment regards her.

“Do you know what you’re talking about?” he ejaculates presently. “You’ve been taking too much of old Stewart’s medicine, or parson Lawrence’s prayers; it is evident that *something* has got into your head.”

“ Oh ! Lyster ! don’t speak to me in that way,” she entreats tearfully ; “ if you are unkind to me now, you will kill me.”

“ *Unkind !* Well ! whatever the Lord made women for, beats my comprehension altogether. The idea of waking a man out of his sleep to tell him such rubbish as that ! Get to your bed, do ! and sleep yourself into your senses again, or I shall think you’re a greater fool than the rest of your sex.”

And turning on his pillow with an oath, Sir Lyster once more composes himself to his balmy slumbers.

CHAPTER XII.

SIGNING THE WARRANT.

AUBERON SLADE takes the first opportunity, on the following morning, to inform his host that he intends to leave Felton Hall, and Sir Lyster Gwynne is naturally astonished both at the suddenness of the proposal and the promptitude with which he intends to put it into execution.

Several of the men, invited for the shooting season, have already left. Felton Hall is thinning day by day of its most agreeable guests ; and its master, who finds little

pleasure in anything but field sports and questionable talk, is strongly opposed to Auberon Slade's new idea.

Besides, had he not affirmed, but a week beforehand, that nothing should prevent his remaining for the pheasant shooting?

"But I have been here for more than a month," urges Mr. Slade, though indecisively; "and my strength is perfectly restored."

"Have you any particular reason for returning to town?" is the blunt rejoinder; and to this he scarcely knows what to answer.

He *has* a particular reason, as all those who have read of him will be aware; but he can hardly tell the husband what that is; and lays himself open to the charge of dissembling, in consequence. He murmurs something about work, and family obligations and previous engagements; but each

excuse meets with its proper refutation, until his intentions have not a leg to stand on.

And then in desperation, remembering her entreaty that he should go before she came downstairs again, and feeling his pride new-pricked by the remembrance, Auberon Slade mentions Lady Gwynne's name—and is sorry for it, the minute afterwards.

“But putting all private considerations to one side,” he stammers, “I think, in the present state of affairs—with your child ill, and her mother's presence so necessary in the sick room—that it will be a relief to Lady Gwynne to have the house cleared as much as possible.”

“Did she tell you so?” demands the husband quickly, and thus, taken aback, Auberon Slade is not ready with his reply.

“Oh, no!—of course not—that is, I

mean, I have had no personal communication with Lady Gwynne since the accident occurred."

The adjective does not escape Sir Lyster's notice—he is a booby—but he is cunning; and where his suspicions are aroused, able to ferret out and piece together trivial circumstances, that would escape the notice of, or be passed over in the wider range of sight, taken by a cleverer man. And having had reason, on more than one occasion, to suspect his wife does not altogether approve of some of the bachelor friends he brings home to Felton Hall, he is determined that this time, at all events, he will have his own way, and let her see it. But he does not breathe a hint of his suspicions to Auberon Slade.

"My dear fellow," he says determinately, "I won't hear of your leaving us—and there's an end of it. Town is empty; you

will find all your friends gone into the country ; and at the end of ten days, you will cut your throat. As to Lady Gwynne and her fancies, it cannot make the slightest difference to her pottering about the child's room, if there are twenty men below stairs or two. And it will make all the difference in the world to me. So let us hear no more about your returning home until you have had, at least, a fortnight's sport with the pheasants. Why ! the birds are more plentiful this year than they've been for the last ten.—Fact !—The covers swarm with them ; and I've two of the best-broke dogs in the county. I refuse to let your port-manteau go out of my drive gates. It's no use thinking of it."

Sir Lyster does not say this because he particularly desires longer to retain the presence of a man with whom he has certainly nothing in common ; but because

he suspects that his wife has, tacitly or otherwise, given him to understand that his room will be preferable to his company ; and he is determined to show her that he is, what he is so fond of proclaiming himself, “master in his own house !” And so, like many another, bent on a selfish purpose that will not permit him to see, he drives his pig to market the wrong way.

Meanwhile, Auberon Slade, by passive non-resistance, is silently assenting to Sir Lyster’s demand. He has no wish to leave Felton Hall ; on the contrary, he has an earnest desire to meet Lady Gwynne again, and hear her tongue refute her written words.

And if this man insists upon it (so he argues with himself), he sees no choice but to remain ; he has done all that was required of him in having expressed a wish to go.

He is very weak, and inconsiderate for her welfare ; but few men are strong when under the dominion of passion, and fewer still will give up their own wishes for the sake of the woman they profess to love.

Still, the recollection of her wish, and the fear of her displeasure, deter him from giving an unqualified consent to her husband's wishes ; and Sir Lyster leaves him, uncertain whether he intends to quit Felton Hall or no, and boiling over with indignation against the supposed author of his impending disappointment.

He goes straight from Auberon Slade to her presence ; and regardless of poor Daisy's broken slumbers, demands an immediate explanation of the mystery.

“ What on earth have you been saying or writing to Auberon Slade about his returning to town ? ”

The abrupt question startles her.

“Saying, writing?” she falters, turning ashy white, as a horrid suspicion darts through her mind that her epistle of the night before, has fallen into the wrong hands.

“Yes; saying or writing. Writing most probably, as Slade declares he has not spoken to you since the child’s accident occurred. Here he comes to me, with some humbugging story of his being obliged to return home at once, before he has even had a shot at the pheasants; and from the manner in which he mentioned your name, I am sure you have had something to do with it.”

“Well,” she replies, hesitatingly, thinking that “honesty will be the best policy,”—a truism which, on occasions, the experience of this world sadly contradicts—“I did say, in answer to a note which Mr. Slade sent me last evening, enquiring after

Daisy's welfare, that — that — perhaps I might not see him again, as it is likely to be a long time before I am able to go downstairs as usual. And you know, Lyster," observing the displeasure which suddenly gathers in her husband's face, "that he has been here for some time — nearly six weeks ; and in any case I suppose it cannot be long before he returns to London. Major Calvert and Mr. Penrhyn leave the day after to-morrow, and — and —"

But here she stops, frightened at the look with which the Baronet confronts her ; his anger is thoroughly roused, and he is about to let her know it.

"How *dare* you ?" he commences ; "how dare you presume to dictate to my friends when their visits here, shall either begin, or cease ? Who gave you leave — by whose authority have you been acting ?"

“ Oh ! Lyster ! don’t be angry ! I did it for the best. Indeed—indeed—it is best that he should go.”

“ *For the best,*” with withering contempt. “ What made you do it at all ? Answer me that !”

“ Daisy is so ill,” she falters, “ and the house is full enough—and—”

“ D—t—n !” exclaims Sir Lyster ; “ that I ever should have taken a woman to interfere in my affairs in this fashion. You have strangely forgotten yourself, madam, and it is fit that you should know it.”

“ Oh ! Lyster ! for God’s sake be advised by me. I don’t think you care much for the society of Mr. Slade, and he does not enjoy the shooting like the other men. Keep Calvert and Penryhn with you ; I daresay they will stay on if you ask them ; but let Auberon Slade go back to his own home, and his own pursuits.”

She has taken his rough hand, and raised her pleading face to his: she is entreating him to spare her honour and his own; but he will neither see nor hear, and shakes her off as though she were obnoxious to him.

“Leave me alone!—will you? What’s the good of all this sentimental nonsense when you have just been doing exactly opposite to what I wish you. However, you’ve overshot the mark this time, and that I can tell you! and none of your slobbering will gain you your own way.”

A strange difference takes place in Lady Gwynne’s demeanour as she hears these words. Her face grows cold, her eyes shoot fire, and she draws up her figure proudly, and is silent.

“I have but two words to say to you on this subject,” continues Sir Lyster, presently. “Auberon Slade will remain at

Felton Hall as long as he chooses to remain here—”

“I am sure I don’t care if he stays till Doomsday,” she interrupts him, scornfully.

“Hold your tongue, and don’t presume to speak till I have finished. He will remain here, and you will come down and do the honours of the dinner-table to him this evening.”

“Give me till to-morrow!” she pants.

“Not a bit of it. Why the devil should I give you till to-morrow—and after your behaviour, too?”

“Daisy!—she is still so weak.”

“She has plenty of nurses to look after her. Hang it all, why do I keep such a lot of servants if my wife is to be turned into a nursery-maid?”

“Say no more ; I will be punctual.”

“You had better be, or you will repent

it," he mutters, angrily, as he turns on his heel, and without a glance at his sick child, leaves the apartment.

When he is gone, Lady Gwynne rises from her seat, and with a knitted brow and trembling hand, turns the key in the door after him.

He has raised her pride, indignation, resentment, and has completed the task which he commenced that morning; let him beware of the fruit that shall spring from the seed he scatters with so liberal a hand.

To repulse her confidence, and throw cold water on an exhibition of her sentiment, is a dangerous game for any man to play with any woman; but where he is not master of her love it is a fatal mistake, and Sir Lyster Gwynne has committed that mistake now.

That his wife ever cared for him is most

improbable, for he married her at an age when she had had none of that experience of the world which is absolutely necessary to the formation of a prudent and happy choice.

But the feeling with which she will regard him henceforth will fall very short of the quiet submission which has characterised her previous demeanour; for she has gone to him with her heart, hot and restless, filled with love—her first experience of the passion—for another man, and yet only eager that this one; her true owner; to whom she desires to be faithful; should aid and abet her in treading the path of virtue, and he has refused his help,—has thrust away her clinging hand,—ridiculed her tears,—almost thrown her from him into the arms of Auberon Slade: those dangerous arms, so ready to receive and give her comfort.

And left alone, Lady Gwynne dashes the proud tears from her cheek, and lays down her head on Daisy's pillow, and tries to close her eyes to everything : the cheerless past,—the troublous present,—the dark, uncertain future.

She is roused from her reverie by a knock at the door, and the reception of a slip of paper, on which words are written in the well-known hand.

“What am I to do ? Sir Lyster will not hear of my going ! You must decide for me.”

And, without hesitation, she sits down and sends him her reply.

“*Stay !* It is neither your fault nor mine. We have done our best.”

Ah ! God ! could she foresee the lengthened misery to which those words

condemn her, she would not dare to write them. Did she part with him at once, as she desires and knows is best for her, she might yet outlive her fatal predilection.

But with this hasty note,—the offspring of her husband's inconsideration,—her fate is sealed.

It speeds upon its errand: it reaches the hand of Auberon Slade: and Lady Gwynne has signed the death-warrant of her heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW COMPACT.

THEY meet! How should they meet except with fluttering hearts, and downcast, conscious looks, and lips that strive vainly not to tremble, whilst uttering the most ordinary salutation.

But Sir Lyster Gwynne is satisfied. His wife, clad in soft muslins and rich laces, which well become her graceful, tender beauty, appears before him at the appointed time, and takes her usual place at the head of his table, proving thereby the strength of his marital authority—the superior

power instinctively recognised in the greater mind by the lesser.

What matter to him if she looks pale, and sad, and thoughtful ; if her eyes studiously avoid the glance of Auberon Slade, or the bright flush rises higher and higher in her cheek each time his voice falls on her ear ; her husband is either too dull, or too indifferent to observe it. Some minds might draw an inference from the very care with which the two friends, erstwhile so intimate, avoid each other for the remainder of the evening, keeping as far apart as the limits of the drawing-room will permit them, and pursuing their several employments of music, work, or conversation, without the least attempt at interference on the part of the other. But were his eyes directed to the novelty, Sir Lyster's sole remark would be, that either his wife was sulky, or his guest was sleepy ; there could be no other

reason for the change. The change, indeed, palpable enough from the beginning to such as were sufficiently on the *qui-vive* to assign a cause for it, becomes, ere many days have passed over their heads, but too apparent to those whom it immediately concerns.

Lady Gwynne and Auberon Slade meet as usual ; they even sit together for several hours in the day (for Daisy is sufficiently recovered by this time to be carried out into the garden, and laid upon a sofa beneath the walnut trees), but they neither speak to, nor look at, nor confide in one another as they used to do.

All seems changed between them ; they love, if possible, more passionately than they loved before, but (with the knowledge of it) the sunshine has faded out of their existence. They no longer speak of, nor compare their feelings ; they have stripped

them too bare; shame has invaded their intercourse; and they are afraid of themselves, and of each other.

The verse he reads so eloquently, and which carried so sweet a meaning to each heart, before those hearts had been dissected, now only brings a burning blush into her cheek, and makes his voice falter; the hands which used to lie so fondly in each other, neither trembling nor striving to disengage themselves, now hot and thrilling, meet for a hurried moment, and, as though the contact pained them, unlock by violence, and are free.

Their converse, too, no longer full of the bright hope they once cherished of an innocent and eternal friendship, has become vapid and commonplace; for the past is a forbidden subject; of the present they have nothing to relate; and the future is a dark mystery which will not bear investigation.

When they do talk together and alone, it is in voices sad and subdued, like a mournful echo of past happiness ; or the complaint of souls, utterly bowed down by the hopeless misery that stretches out before them.

Sometimes her tone is so quietly despairing, that, at the risk of again provoking her remorse and incurring her reproaches, Auberon Slade feels bound, by the passion with which he has inspired her, to pour unhallowed balm into her breast, by the reiteration of his unalterable love. At others, it is his voice that shakes her to the very soul, making her almost believe it but the reparation which she owes him, to cast herself at his feet, with the fond assurance that she is his and his only, and he may do with her, and with her life, as he thinks fit. For, with the confession of their mutual love, another great change has passed over,

and become patent to them both—they have stepped into each other's places.

She, who was the Mentor and the head, by acknowledgment of her weakness, has placed herself beneath him ; whilst he, by right of conquest, becomes lord and master.

No longer is her voice heard in counsel or reproof ; henceforth she believes her part is to comfort and submit ; and she feels his influence gaining fresh power over her every day, and, figuratively speaking, is content to sit at his feet like a little child and learn. Humility, particularly if late acquired, is one of the best proofs of earnest love ; no true adorer ever yet considered himself superior to the creature whom he worships ; and when he finds it out, it is the first symptom of his decreasing passion.

With Auberon Slade's attachment has sprung up the manly intuition to protect and cherish the woman who is ready to risk

everything for him ; but he still considers her (and will do so to his life's end) as infinitely above himself in every respect. And so they sit by each other's side, day after day, moody and almost silent, except when the topic is perfectly irrelevant to that which engrosses both their hearts ; and should it wander round to anything approaching it, it is checked by a deep sigh.

But it is impossible that such a state of affairs can go on for ever, and after a week of silent misery, Lady Gwynne is the first to broach the subject of their distress.

“Auberon !” (they have not ceased to call each other by their Christian names, the alteration would have been too apparent) “a great change has come over our pleasant intercourse ; we are neither of us so happy as we used to be ! Do you not think that, instead of brooding over what appears to be irremediable, it would be

wiser to sift the matter, and try to find out if, after all, there may not be a cure for it!"

It is at the close of a long and weary day that she thus speaks. Daisy has been carried into the house to take her afternoon nap, and they are alone, pacing up and down the gravelled drive, but keeping at a respectful distance from each other.

At the sound of her voice, Auberon Slade turns, a sudden pleasure beaming in his eye; it appears to him as though he had lost, and but at that moment, re-gained his love.

"Oh, Gwendoline! I am so glad to hear you speak of it. I have been so miserable, so self-reproachful since that day. I feel as though I could never forgive myself for having left those wretched verses lying about."

"Poor verses! it was not entirely their

fault. No! Auberon, there is no doubt about the matter, we have gone too far."

"I know it, I feel it!" he murmurs.

"And shall have to pay the penalty of our rashness! But thank God it is not too late to retrace our steps. We were very happy before, dear, were we not?"

"Happy! I should think so! Oh! Gwendoline! whilst it was soul to soul, and 'nothing less,' I gloried in your love; I felt a better, a worthier creature for the knowledge that you cared for me, and took an interest in all I did or suffered, but now——"

"Let us go back to those dear days, then," she interrupts him earnestly. "Let us be the friends, the brother and sister that we were before, and forget all about the fatal mistake we made last week."

"Child! is it possible?"

"Possible, Auberon! why not? Re-

member that in this life we can never hope to be more to each other than dear friends——”

“My darling, there is no need to remind me of that! Does not the bitter truth, like a mocking devil, haunt me day and night?”

He speaks so passionately, that she stops short in her career, and regards him mournfully.

“Oh, Auberon! don’t talk in that way! you make me so very, very miserable.”

“I would tear my tongue out to save you a moment’s pain, dear Gwendoline.”

“Then why fret after an impossibility; why reject the happiness that God places within our reach, to lament that which never can be ours?”

“Who knows?” he interrupts her, hastily.

“ ‘My faith is large in time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.’ ”

Only a quotation, but it has the power to make her heart dance warmly ; so quick is it to believe or disbelieve, with him.

“ Then why do you look so melancholy, Auberon ? we can still be friends, the dearest, nearest friends to one another, and thank heaven that it allows us so much.”

But he is silent ; the hearty acquiescence that she waits for, does not come.

“ Oh ! *do* speak ! do tell me that it is not impossible ; that we shall not be altogether separated.”

“ God forbid !”

“ Auberon !” very gravely, and after a little pause, “ do you mean to intimate we were not wrong ?”

“ I know we were, altogether wrong !”

“ And are you not sorry for it ?”

“ Devilishly sorry !”

“ Oh, my dear ! then what objection can you make to my proposal ? There is but

one alternative. We must either separate ; never see, or talk to, or place confidence in one another more (Auberon *could* you bear it ?), or we must return to the footing on which we stood a fortnight since. Take your choice ! Mine has been made ages ago."

"You know it," he exclaims fervently ; "your choice and mine, as everything that concerns us, are but one. I will be your friend, your brother, your servant, anything, so that you do not drive me from you—to despair."

"That's my dear good Auberon," she answers, and her hand steals into his. "I knew that you would come to see things in their proper light. You have too much sense, too much good feeling, to waste all the hopes of your life and mine, upon a chimera. We shall be very happy again now ; we shall write and read and sit to-

gether as at first, and never remember there was a moment when life looked otherwise to us than what it does. It will require but an effort after all ; just an ordinary effort, such as anyone could make, to detach our thoughts from that unfortunate occurrence ; and if the remembrance should disturb us, we will regard it as though it had been a scene in some melodrama in which we both acted very well, but the repetition of which, it would be impossible to carry into daily life. Shall it be so ?”

“ Of course ; nothing could be easier.”

She stops at that, and heaves a sigh.

“ Easy or difficult, Auberon ! it must be done.”

“ I am quite aware of that, Gwendoline.”

“ And you will help, not hinder me, in doing it ?”

“ I would lie down under the wheels of

the next waggon we meet, and let them pass over my head, if you desired me."

"And you wish to keep me as a friend, Auberon?"

"I couldn't part with you, Gwendoline! it would be impossible. You have become part of my life."

A glow of pleasure lights up her pale features, but her voice continues steady.

"Then you will do as I tell you, and my affection can still be yours."

"For ever, darling?"

"Oh! Auberon! how can you ask? Have I not given you my promise? Is it possible that any circumstances; any joy; any misery; can alter that? Life may change for both of us; you may marry, or even cease to care for me"—here he interrupts her with an earnest denial, yet she goes on unheedingly—"but nothing that you can say or think; no faith or unfaith on your

part, can do away with the sacred promises which I have made to you—which I renew this very moment ! More than your friend I cannot—dare not—be, but your faithful unchanging friend I shall continue to my life's end ! So help me God."

Carried away by the fervour of her feelings, Lady Gwynne stops, and raises her eyes appealingly to heaven ; and in the shelter of the dusk which is fast settling down beneath the trees of the shady carriage drive, Auberon Slade takes her in his arms and kisses her.

He has not done so since the day when they were interrupted by poor Daisy's accident ; and by the glow that rushes through her veins, the faint sick feeling that oppresses her as his lips meet her own, Gwendoline Gwynne might be warned of the sophistry of the new compact into which she has just entered.

But she is not ; she only feels intensely thankful that the gloomy reserve which existed between them, has been swept away ; and the mutual confidence, which adds so considerably to his happiness, once more restored ; so similar is true, unselfish love in all its bearings, whether its origin be innocent or otherwise.

The ice is broken ; yet, after a little while, they seem none the happier for it ; for the open discussion of their feelings, and the improbability that they will ever be gratified, does not bring the cure that Lady Gwynne anticipated ; and too often ends in bitter tears on her part, and in violent lamentations over the inevitable, or rebellion against the wisdom that had so ordained their lives, on his !

It is about this period that, probably from a vain hope of making him believe her not worthy of his regret, she seems to

derive pleasure from exaggerating her own share in the business, and ascribing all the blame of a mutual fault to her love of admiration, and desire to attract notice. It is useless for her lover to remind her that their affection had arrived at its full growth, even before she was aware of it, and that the final *dénouement* was the result of accident. She is quite sure that had it not been for herself, Auberon Slade's virtue would never have been endangered; and that she alone is to be despised, and criminated, and looked down upon.

“Of course it is all my fault,” she will say decidedly; “and any one who heard our story would make the same remark. I!—a married woman, and a mother! what right had I even to dream of such a thing as love? The blame rests entirely with me; you will think so yourself after the lapse of a year or two.”

“I am sure I shall do no such thing,” he answers warmly. “I have never blamed you, even in my inmost thoughts, and never shall; let the misery be double what it is! I ought to have gone away ages ago; I had no right to remain here, feeling for you as I did.”

“You stupid boy! as if that would have made any difference! We should have met in town or elsewhere, and my insatiable vanity would have hunted you down, all the same! It is no fault of yours.—Free and unfettered as you were, and yet fresh from a disappointment that had affected you very deeply, what more natural than that you should turn to the first offer of affection that was made you, for solace and relief?”

“But you never offered me your affection, I wrung the avowal of it from you.”

“You read it in every tone and look and gesture (you told me so, remember!), and what can I have been doing with my tones, and looks, and gestures, to permit them to betray so shameful a secret? Ah! there is no excuse for me—none! If Lyster were unkind to me, or treated me badly, as some husbands do their wives——”

“He *is* unkind to you! brutally so at times! and every friend of yours knows it!”

“Oh, Auberon! how can you say so? I have everything I want, and a great deal of liberty; and if Lyster is rather rough at times, and swears occasionally, he has never struck me——”

“Struck you!—by heavens! I should hope not. He will have to settle an account with me the day he does that! But I tell you, Gwendoline, that he behaves brutally to you; that there has not

been a man at Felton Hall, during the shooting season, who has not observed and commented upon it; and that I feel sometimes as though I could not sit in the same room with him, and not give him my opinion of his conduct!"

"Oh, Auberon, Auberon! think what you are saying! Would you put an end to our friendship, at once and for ever?"

"Then I must leave this place before I have entirely lost my patience with him—or I shall be kicking him before I know what I am about, and then there will be a regular shindy."

"And you would desert me then, and leave me without a soul to turn to; to bear all my troubles alone as I best may? Oh! how I wish that we had never met!"

But he is at her feet, drying her tears,

entreating her pardon for his hasty words, and promising to be more patient for the future, and to think as well of her husband as it is in his power to do.

“Look at me !” cries Lady Gwynne, as she smiles upon him through her glistening tears ; “am I worth all the worry and distress you go through on my account ? Six-and-twenty years of age, and looking thirty if I look a day ! Without beauty, without genius, without anything in particular to recommend me to your notice, what is there in me that fascinates you, unless it be the knowledge of that love which was not of my own seeking—and I could not part with it if I would ?”

“I neither know nor care,” is the impassioned answer ; “I only feel that I adore you ; that you captivate me as no other woman has ever done before ; and that you can do so without the aid of any especial

beauty, or genius, or accomplishment, is a proof that your influence will last for ever. If I love you for nothing that you have, I cannot unlove you for anything you may lose. It is yourself, my Gwendoline, yourself that holds me captive, and must do so as long as you and I continue."

"Oh, Auberon! dearest, don't talk like that, you do make me so wretched; you take away all the hope I possess of living to see you cured. Indeed it is not I, it is a mere infatuation that holds you. I am a most ordinary woman, out of whom care and disappointment have driven the few attractions which perhaps I once possessed. There are dozens and dozens of girls, better than myself in every respect, who would be but too ready to exchange their love for yours——"

"Thank you! thank you very much! I will set about looking out for one this very day."

“ You know what I mean ; that if you would only try to look at this matter by the light of common sense, it would appear so different to you. You are wasting so much happiness ; other people manage to enjoy their friendships without desiring anything more—and—and—there is no question about it, Auberon, we *must* do the same !”

“ Who disputes it ? I thought the compact had been signed, sealed, and delivered, long ago ! We *are* friends, Gwendoline, are we not ? ‘ Only that and nothing more,’ as somebody says somewhere. I’m sure I don’t know what I have done to-day in particular to have earned such a lecture from you.”

And Auberon Slade saunters away, leaving the unhappy woman to brood on her own thoughts, and thoroughly wretched until it is his royal pleasure to smile again ;

when many days will elapse before she summons up fresh courage to disturb his serenity.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE VERGE.

HE finds great fault with her about this time for avoiding his company, showing an unworthy distrust, as he calls it, of his resolution, and absenting herself unnecessarily from home — for going, in fact, too often to church.

For Auberon Slade is just in that state of dissatisfaction with himself—of a full consciousness that he is not acting well or wisely, and a semi-consciousness that his rash indulgence can only end in misery for himself and Lady Gwynne—when he is

ready to quarrel with anyone--and especially with her—for trying to behave better than he is inclined to do.

But she will not give up her evening services, even for Auberon Slade, and day after day she flies to the little village church as to a city of refuge, and there, falling at the foot of the cross, pours out the burthen of her sorrow, and tries hard to persuade herself that she is content to take life as God has sent it ; and that her own weak, sinful inclinations are not drawing her, hour by hour, closer to the brink of the pit, from which she believes she is trying to escape.

Lady Gwynne is not a religious woman, for were she so, in the strict meaning of the word, it is probable that she would have been granted strength to crush her love for Auberon Slade, even in the bud ; and, at all events, whilst imbibing the

divine grace that flows to us through the sacramental channels, and constantly reminded of her duty by the offices of religion, she could never have played so long and so heedlessly with the earthly fire which now threatens to consume her.

She is not religious, then—many good and pious people would call her just the contrary—but she has in her a depth of feeling, a power of devotion, and a capability of realising divine things, such as is seldom granted in this life, even to those who have faithfully striven to perform their religious duties ; such as will, at some future day, raise her erring but repentant nature to the sublime heights of sanctity.

Mr. Lawrence, who, having known Lady Gwynne ever since Sir Lyster brought her home to Felton, has recognised this great capacity for good in her, watched over,

prayed for, and done all in his power to bring it to perfection, and has been proportionately disappointed during the last few months, to observe that her daily services have been neglected, is charmed to see her once more in her old place: her figure bowed low before the awful Presence in which she kneels, and her face humbly hidden in her hands.

He has always taken a great interest in the mistress of the Hall; he knows she is not happy with her husband, and he has shuddered to hear the light suspicions that have been breathed of her of late; now, he believes, all must be right again, that the danger—if there were any—is past, and God's goodness and her own sense of duty, have brought her once more into a harbour of safety.

And in the solitude of his chamber he does not forget to return thanks for what

appears to be an answer to his prayers on her behalf, and to entreat that the same mercy which has led her home may rivet her affections upon those things, unseen but eternal, which alone can have the power to satisfy so exuberant a love. Incense to God—offered perhaps in the eyes of the world, too soon, but heard, accepted, and fulfilled, as such petitions ever are.

Meanwhile, could Mr. Lawrence look into the heart of the poor impenitent, who has become so regular in her attendance before the altar, he might also be tempted to believe that he had returned thanks prematurely. She weeps, it is true, weeps hot, scalding tears, for the sin and sorrow of the world, and the weakness into which each day betrays herself; and she prays, long and earnestly, that God may remove her grief, or reconcile her to it, or take

her away where she shall never grieve nor sin again.

But she does not weep because her sin dishonours God and stains her bright baptismal robe afresh, nor is she ready to live on because He wills it, and kiss the rod that makes her a fellow-sufferer with Him.

Yet she is very miserable, and all the more so, because she feels with each fresh service that Heaven has less attraction for her, and the world more ; and yet, with the intuition of despair, she clings to Heaven, and feels as though, were she to miss one evensong, she would miss God altogether.

And Mr. Lawrence often walks part of the way home with her, strengthening her feeble resolution to do right, by indirect allusions to such a case as he supposes hers may be ; so that occasionally she arrives at

the Hall almost in good spirits, and quite sure that it is not impossible to do one's duty in this world and yet be happy, the mood of all others in which Auberon Slade most dislikes to see her, for its hopefulness seems to reflect upon his discontent, and generally draws down a censure from his lips, which drives it all away. And then she, too, will begin to question the mercy which has hitherto preserved them, and blame Providence for the misfortune which has emanated solely from themselves.

“I wonder,” she says, with her mournful eyes fixed upon the drooping, moody attitude of her lover, “why God ever permitted us to meet each other, Auberon? He must have known, from the very beginning, what would be the result of our acquaintanceship: that we should love, and be miserable, and tempted to do wrong;

and yet He let us meet! It is very strange."

"Of course He knew it," rejoins her companion sullenly, "and the parsons would persuade us that He doesn't like to see His creatures unhappy or sinful, and that at the same time He is all powerful and able to rule the accidents of this world. What are we to believe?"

"I hardly know," is the melancholy reply. "He might have prevented it so easily, if He had chosen, might He not? Our meeting was not of our own seeking; everything seemed to go against it. And yet it came to pass. Oh! I am so unhappy! Why didn't He kill me months ago, and put an end to it! I would have died joyfully if my death had saved you from this misery."

"Darling! don't speak of it. What

should I do without you? You must live, not die for me!"

"But He has permitted our love to grow and grow until it has become a part of myself. I want to love Him—I want to serve Him; but I don't feel as if I could love and serve Him without you, and I know that I cannot do it with you. Oh! Auberon! save me from myself. I feel as though some invisible hand were drawing me nearer and nearer to the vortex of hell, and that I had neither strength nor will with which to resist it! Oh! be merciful, and leave me before it is too late. I would rather die of despair, than live as I am living now;" and throwing herself on her knees beside him, Gwendoline Gwynne lays her head upon his shoulder, and bursts into an agony of tears.

Auberon Slade looks down upon the woman who has thus thrown herself upon

his mercy, with a passion that is greatly purified by the protecting element with which it mingles.

He has no wish to wrong her; on the contrary, if it were possible, he would defend her chastity with the last drop of his blood, and he would give worlds at that moment if some one would only rush into the room, and say that Sir Lyster had tumbled down dead in a fit, that he might honourably wed his widow. But none of these convenient accidents ever happen in real life; and Auberon Slade really believes that in taking this woman away from her husband, he shall be introducing her to such a state of felicity as she has never known before; and therefore he neither corroborates her fears, nor tells her they are needless; he merely strives to set the matter before her in a different light.

“My darling girl!” stroking the fair hair

that lies against his breast gently as he speaks, "you take far too exaggerated a view of this sort of thing! I acknowledge that it is a great pity, that it would be far better if we could avoid it; but you mustn't believe everything that men like Lawrence tell you on the subject. Marriage, my dear Gwendoline, is an excellent institution—I should be the last man in the world to deny that; more, it is absolutely necessary that, for the sake of society, and the keeping together of families, it should be strictly observed; but still, when all's said and done, you know, it is only a social arrangement, and you will find nothing in the Bible to teach you that before a man and woman live together, they must go into a church, and have their hands joined by a priest!"

"But, Auberon!—the commandments!"

"My dear child! the commandments

were made for the Jews ! We might just as well say it is sinful to eat roast pork, as to swear by every little fraction of the ten commandments. Besides, they were drawn up in the days when every man had as many wives as he chose to keep, and not the slightest excuse for stealing his neighbour's."

"Oh ! dearest ! you could never, never teach me to believe that you are right. The Bible speaks plainly enough upon the subject : I want no further light than it can give me. I can only lament that such a warning should be needed by you and me."

At this he slightly moves his shoulder to one side, so as to relieve it from the burden of her head ; and she perceives the action, and interprets it (as it is meant) into an expression of displeasure.

"Don't put me from you !" entreatingly ;
"I have no other home but this. The rest

of the world is cold and dark to me ; if you were to turn against me I should die."

"My dear child ! you know how far I am disposed to put you from me ! But this kind of thing must end some day—it cannot go on for ever."

"Oh ! Auberon ! be patient and trust in Heaven ! Everything must come right at last for those who wait and trust."

"Patience and trust ! I am sick of the very words. The world is altogether wrong. There is no such thing as truth or justice in it."

"But try not to lose all hope, for my sake ! Think of the lines you are so fond of quoting,—

" ' Wait, and Love himself will bring
The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit
Of wisdom. Wait : my faith is large in Time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.' "

Her soft, sweet eyes are smiling on him :

through her tears ; her trembling lips whisper the words close to his own ; her whole expression, her every gesture, is one of entreaty that he will spare her and himself, not only the anguish that is in store for them, but the pain of recognising its approach.

But he is not in the mood for mercy ; his eyes refuse to answer hers ; he rises from his seat, almost impatiently, and leaving her still kneeling on the floor, walks up to his own room, and shuts himself noisily in.

Then she too stands upon her feet, and wipes her streaming eyes, and seeks her chamber, only to prostrate herself afresh, and wonder, through an overwhelming burst of sorrow, if she shall ever unravel the mystery of this world's tutelage.

After this particular conversation, Auberon Slade leaves Lady Gwynne considerably to herself ; not of intent, perhaps, or

with the conceived desire, by the assumption of a wholesome indifference, to bring matters to a crisis ; but, simply, because he is impatient and fretful under the restraint imposed upon him in her presence, and inclined to believe that a partial separation will prove sufficient to enable him to shake the feeling off.

And so he affects the company of Sir Lyster and the few male guests who still remain at Felton Hall ; and he laughs a great deal, and smokes a great deal, and drinks a great deal ; and leaves the woman, on whom he has been dancing close attendance for the last two months, to break her heart silently over his neglect ; to spend long nights of wakefulness and weary days of solitude, until she is ready to accede to any terms in order that he may smile on her again ; and would rather lie down in the dust beneath his feet, and let him

trample on her, than live without the assurance of his love and sympathy.

She occupies her morning room in solitary grandeur now, surrounded by the books, and fragmentary scraps of poetry which so vividly recall the past; or listlessly wanders up and down the shrubbery, until the bell calls her to evening church, where, although all her prayers resolve themselves into petitions for cessation from her suffering, she tries hard to persuade herself that she is very grateful to have been spared temptation for that afternoon.

But her heavy glance, and wearied languid movements, tell tales to more than one observer at the dinner table, and speak volumes to the person whom they most concern, so that his looks soon follow suit, and two such forlorn pairs of eyes were never seen as, at furtive moments, filled

with reproach, gaze on each other, and are detected only to be veiled.

At last she cannot bear the suspense and misery any longer ; she, who in her selfishness, imagines she is killing by slow tortures the heart for which she would lay down her life, and she entreats him, in a voice replete with earnest truth, to go away and leave her to her fate, so that he may but save himself the endurance of an agony which is worse than death.

They have met, almost unexpectedly, so scanty has their intercourse become, at the entrance of the shrubbery, and as her agitated tones and features strike on his ear and meet his eye, Auberon Slade draws her quickly within the shelter of its foliage.

“ Oh ! I cannot, *cannot* bear to see you thus ; so pale and miserable and downcast, and yet striving to keep up an appearance of gaiety which mocks your heart and

mine! Auberon! it must not—it *shall* not go on any longer—you will kill yourself! Go! go at once, and never see me more; leave me to my fate! I can bear all things and live—so that you are happy.”

“Leave you to your fate!—Gwendoline! do you believe it possible? No! you are right. This suspense must kill us both; for though I dare not stay, I feel that I *cannot* go!”

“You *must*, Auberon! I will make you! You must go home to-morrow—to-day—this very moment.”

“And so I will—on one condition!—That you go with me, Gwendoline!”

But she does not answer him; and when he stops to enquire why her footsteps are so suddenly arrested, he finds her, leaning for support against a tree, pale as death, and shaking in every limb, but with eyes fixed on him, gleaming with a light that

tells him that his hour of triumph has arrived.

“Child! it is now my turn to say, you *must*, you *shall*, and I will *make* you! I do not ask it as a favour, I demand it as a right: you only give me what is mine! Gwendoline!” and his rich voice melts into a whisper, “you owe it to me! you, who have sapped my life of all its energy, its strength, and its enjoyment; who have turned a world that was at least hopeful, into a barren wilderness; and cramped the efforts by which I was striving after fame! If you can desert me now, if you care so little for me, and mean so little by what you have said, as to drive me from you, despairing and alone, I shall never do anything to make my name a name of mark. With you—by your side—inspired by your love, I may work wonders; bereft of you and hope at the same time,

there can be but one end for me—and I trust it may come speedily—the grave !”

“ Oh, Auberon ! my dearest ! my beloved ! don’t talk to me like that ! I who would die to make you happy !”

She grasps him by the shoulder as she speaks—her lips with gentle violence press his hair, his eyes, his features—all the reserve of the last fortnight has flown in one moment before the terrible picture that his words have conjured up.

“ Prove that you tell the truth by living for me ! I ask no greater sacrifice at your hands.”

“ Oh, wait—oh, let me think a moment ! My head is whirling, everything seems to be confusion. No ! no, don’t touch me ! don’t speak to me—leave me alone, for God’s sake ! I must settle this matter by myself.”

She leans against the friendly tree that

supported her before ; her eyes close and turn in upon her soul ; her breath is drawn laboriously. Happiness and misery, life and death, heaven and hell seem trembling in the balance which mentally is weighed before her. She thinks of Felton Hall ; of the many hopeless years she has spent there, silent and uncomplaining it is true, but bound to the earth beneath the weight of an uncongenial companionship, so distant that a huge barrier seems to be raised between herself and it, and yet so close that the very remembrance brings a shudder of loathing and abhorrence. She thinks of her wasted barren life ; the want of sympathy she has experienced ; the gross passions to which she has been subjected ; and feels as though she has been trailed in the dust until she is unfit for any lot but that which has fallen to her.

And yet, Auberon Slade—with his power

of intellect, his youth and beauty, his sympathy with her feelings and misfortunes—Auberon Slade loves her, and desires her for his own.

Oh, bliss ! oh, happiness ! Could earthly happiness, could heavenly bliss, exceed the rapture of that knowledge ; the certainty of loving, and of being loved ?

As the poor frail, sorely-tempted heart permits itself to linger on this dangerous delight, a vision of life as it *might* be, spent at his side, rises in her mind and intoxicates her.

A vision of day after day, passed in the certain consciousness that *he is here* ; of having him at every moment to share her pleasures or distract her cares ; to know if he is sick, *her* hand has the best right to smooth his pillow ; and that when she dies, her last glance will be fixed on him.

But at the thought of death, the bright

flush that has risen to her cheek as her reflections culminate, fades back again, and Auberon Slade, perceiving that some question, adverse to his fate, has dared to intrude itself, takes her two hands, cold from agitation, in his own, and sends a warm electric shock thrilling through all her veins.

It is an act worthy of Satan, who fears the soul he longs for, will escape his clutches.

“You *owe* it to me, Gwendoline!” he repeats, softly. “Think—not of yourself, but of what my lonely life will be without you!” And then, referring to his own lines, he goes on, almost fiercely :

“ ‘Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed ;
My life and thine inevitably mixed,
We take our destiny and do not fear.’ ”

Is it your love or your courage that is less than mine ?”

At this she wakes,—revives,—and meeting his impassioned glance with a look of wild excitement, throws all consideration to the winds : forgets honour,—duty,—prayer,—everything, excepting that she loves him, and would rather go to hell in his company than to heaven alone.

“Neither ! Auberon. I have no wish, no will but yours. Build me up, or destroy me, as you think best.”

She casts herself upon him, and as he receives her in his arms, do the man justice to believe, that the sharpest pang of self-reproach he has ever experienced in his life, runs through the breast on which she hides her tacitly consenting face.

“Oh ! my love ! if I could but save you from it : but it is our fate, and my life shall prove the gratitude I feel for your

devotion. Gwendoline ! tell me that you will never repent your generosity !”

“ Oh ! no !—Oh ! no ! How could I ? It is *for you*.”

And yet the choking sobs which she strives to stifle on his shoulder, sound like a bitter sarcasm on the happiness which she promises herself.

“ When shall it be, my darling ? To-morrow ? Can you be ready ? I shall have several arrangements to make first.”

“ Whenever you please ! From this day I shall only live to obey your commands !”

“ My own dear girl ! To-morrow, then, at three. Shall we go to Paris, Gwendoline ?”

“ Anywhere you think best ! I have no choice !”

“Paris will be as good a place as any until the first breeze has blown over. Oh! my dear love: the devotion of my whole life will be insufficient to repay you for the sacrifice you are about to make for me—”

“Hush!—hush! There can be no debts between you and me. We mutually benefit and——wrong each other! May Heaven forgive us!”

“It will, dearest! depend upon it. It knows how great the temptation has been and how sore the trouble.”

She does not answer, but a slight shudder runs through the figure which is pressed against his own.

“My darling! I can’t have you think of anything now, excepting me. Why do you try to disengage yourself?”

“Oh! let me go! I want to be alone!”

“And leave me so?” reproachfully.

She is back again, even as he speaks.

“Auberon! if I leave you, it is only to collect my thoughts! I feel ill and agitated, and in want of rest. Have I not said enough to satisfy you?”

“Of course! Do just as you feel inclined. But don’t forget your promise, Gwendoline!”

“I am not likely to do so! But, Auberon—Auberon!” with an excited clutch upon his arm, “if this day’s work is not to fulfil your hopes and mine, may God strike me dead before we meet again.”

“It will—it *must* fulfil them,” he replies, earnestly.

But she has quitted his side almost as

she finishes speaking, and her light, fluttering robes are already sweeping the shrubby paths some distance in advance of him.

END OF VOL. I.

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